A Requirement for Peace: Information Hygiene

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Abstract

The article highlights that the current conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine are manifestations of a profound change in the world order, which until now has been dominated by the West. Today, nations long labelled as "underdeveloped" are challenging this hegemony, calling into question Western technological and cultural superiority. The world is becoming multipolar and multicultural, leading to growing misunderstanding between those who accept this change and those who oppose it. Confrontation is replacing compromise, affecting all aspects of daily and public life. As a result, the flow of information is now marked by propaganda and manipulation, leaving ordinary people uncertain in the face of contradictory narratives. Hence the urgent need for "information hygiene" in order to discern the real issues and hidden interests behind events as they are reported. The author analyses the different forms of disinformation and suggests ways to guard against it in order to develop independent judgement.

Keywords*: disinformation, propaganda, information hygiene, global conflicts, multipolarity.*

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1. Introduction

The horrific fighting unfolding on the big screen in Ukraine and Palestine is only the visible part of a much larger upheaval.

For centuries, the world order was based on Western domination, in terms of Western weapons, Western technology and Western hermeneutics. This began with what is commonly referred to as the "discovery of America" in 1492, followed by the colonial era and the division of the world among Western powers. The "industrial revolution" consolidated this hold over almost the entire planet. The Second World War led to a transfer of power from the weakened European countries to the United States of America. The end of the Cold War in 1990 confirmed the hegemony of the latter. Many imagined a kind of *Pax Americana*. One American historian even dared to evoke an 'end of history'[2] .

This may now be a thing of the past. A vast process is currently underway. The Western order was based on technological, and therefore military, superiority

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[2] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992.

and on the conviction that it represented "The" civilisation par excellence, as opposed to backward traditional cultures. It represented progress, advancement on the axis of time. However, the conditions for this hegemony no longer exist. Some countries once described in the West as 'underdeveloped' have awakened to the point where they sometimes outclass Western countries. The *body* of certainties on which the West relied to impose its world view is cracking more and more visibly. Countries that were once dominated are refusing to be dominated any longer and, in some cases, are seeking revenge. For those who still believe they are the masters of the world and the guardians of 'civilisation', nothing is going well.

Some in the West have understood this and are preparing to live in a world that is both multipolar and multicultural. Others have understood nothing or do not want to hear anything. For them, it is a question of defending the existing order, which is also the basis of their political status. The gap between the two sides has widened. They no longer understand each other, and some are unwilling to listen to any point of view other than their own. The search for compromise has given way to confrontation at all levels of society. Everyone must be careful about what they say in public, or even to their cousin or neighbour.

In this context, levels of information are, of course, highly variable. But this has probably always been the case. What is new is that we are witnessing a clash between a discourse that prolongs the past and another that anticipates the future, sometimes a little too quickly. For some, what existed must be maintained at all costs. For others, we must acknowledge that it has given way to something else. And so, there are clashes on the battlefield, but there is also a war of words, a fight to the death to win over public opinion.

This means several things. First, propaganda is in full swing. Some people are a little too quick to mistake their desires for reality. Others, often the same people, come to believe what they wanted to make others believe. The bearers of news proclaim what they know will please the Prince. The Prince listens to them, believes what he hears and hunts down those who would have him hear that "the king is naked". Secondly, the man in the street, the one who watches the "television news", ends up not knowing what is going on. Words no longer mean anything. Contradictory information follows one another, overlapping or colliding. His traditional reference points are shaken. He no longer knows on what stable basis to assess the scope and meaning of what he hears around him. So he risks adhering to the well-chosen words of the first smooth talker on the "television set" or believing what he reads in the newspaper he has trusted for twenty-five years.

It is therefore fair to say that information hygiene is essential as a prerequisite for understanding what is happening, the issues behind events, and the hidden interests that those involved strive to conceal because their status and power are at stake. This understanding of what is happening, of the points of view and

interests at stake, and of the historical and cultural dynamics in which they are embedded, is the foundation of a peace that is more than just a pause between two causes of misunderstanding and new conflicts. This healthy approach will be presented in two stages: what forms of disinformation should we be wary of; and how can we escape propaganda in order to access information that we can consider to be true, or at least plausible, in order to base our own point of view on it.

2. Techniques and networks of disinformation

There is a significant gap between what actually happened and what is reported in the press or on social media. Either the information is distorted from reality, or it is manipulated by those who transmit it, either to convey their own point of view or to elicit a certain reaction from the recipient. This distortion is all the more real when the subject is complex and far removed from what we already know.

2.1. Information is necessarily selective

Those who disseminate information (journalists, press services) choose which information to highlight. This leads us to an initial conclusion: information corresponds to a selection of facts relating to a given event, deemed interesting enough to be reported to readers, listeners or viewers; this selection corresponds 1) to what the person transmitting it considers important, from their point of view, to report (or 'give an account' of), 2) to the quality of what they have been told by the witnesses they have been able to talk to in order to gather the elements of their description.

Therefore, the information is necessarily selective in relation to what is happening in reality. Several things remain to be determined in order to judge the quality of the information delivered to the recipient: based on what criteria was a particular event deemed worthy of being retained and reported? Which characteristics of the event will be retained, and not others, to be included in the information? How reliable are the witness or witnesses, or what the journalist saw and remembered if he or she was a direct witness to what is being reported?

2.2. The information chain

It is clear that information rarely flows directly from the witness of the event to the recipient of the information. It passes through a varying number of intermediaries, each of which is a source of bias and error, whether intentional or not, in relation to what actually happened.

It is therefore clear that the 'production' of information is a complex process. It is not only a reflection of what is happening in reality, but can also deviate

dangerously from it, given the number of relays, or intermediaries, between the event itself and the recipient of the information. This discrepancy is likely to be all the greater the more complex the event is and the more important the issues at stake. This is a problem that arises in terms of: competence, on the part of the various intermediaries, who are sometimes called upon to deal with subjects with which they are unfamiliar; transparency regarding the methods used to collect and transmit information; the time and resources available to verify and contextualise information; honesty regarding the choices made and the intentions behind those choices.

2.3. The growing risk of information bias

Information bias has increased and is likely to increase further for a number of reasons. Let us explore these reasons. The information production chain, when dealing with distant or complex subjects, tends to become more complicated, which increases the risk of bias that tends to mask or distort certain aspects of reality, without the recipient of this information being able to realise it; the journalist's justified concern for simplification leads to distortion. Some of the topics that may be covered by the news are beyond our competence and the criteria by which we could traditionally make a personal judgement. the recipient of the information is no longer able to use their critical faculties, as they are unaware of the ins and outs of the event about which they believe they are (correctly) informed; they are then tempted to imagine that reality corresponds exactly to what they are told. Certain issues are beyond our understanding or no longer correspond to the criteria that enabled us to orient ourselves in relation to the world and current events. The viewpoints we have inherited are often out of step with reality and no longer allow us to properly assess the scope of the changes taking place. In other words, when it comes to these changes, we are a little lost and often try to cling to ideas that are more a kind of 'ready-made thinking' than genuine personal reflection.

The men and women of the 21st century are thus in a vulnerable position with regard to what certain influential agents are trying to make them believe. They can fall victim to manipulation.

2.4. Different forms of information manipulation

The recipient of information (reader, listener, YouTube subscriber or social media user) must therefore be very careful and exercise critical thinking, even when they believe they can trust the source, if they want to be properly informed and avoid any risk of manipulation that they may not be aware of. "Disinformation" can take one of the following forms:

Silence, in other words the absence of any information about a fact or

event that could be considered important. It may have gone unnoticed by those who "manufacture" the information as it reaches its recipients. But it may also be that this silence is deliberate because the fact or event is considered "inconvenient" in relation to the ideological or political message that is to be "conveyed" to the recipients of the information.

Minimisation. The same applies to the importance given to it. If an event is highlighted by the sender or intermediary, it is because the recipient of the information is themselves invited to attach value to it. The presentation thus gives the event the value that it is suggested should be given to it. The aim is therefore (without telling the reader or listener) to guide their attention in line with the wishes of the producers of the information.

Fake news. This involves fabricating and presenting facts that never actually happened in order to elicit indignation, satisfaction or approval from the recipient of the information. The aim is to (falsely) illustrate the opinion that the producers of the information seek to elicit from its recipients. The motive for spreading *fake news* may be political, ideological or commercial. The problem is that it may be denied, which then defeats the purpose. This is why *fake news* often hides behind uncontrolled or difficult-to-identify sources.

Partial information. This consists of reporting only part of the event that is the subject of the information, in order to conceal what would be "embarrassing" from the point of view that the author seeks to convey. For example, in the case of a war, the "bombing of a hotel" will be reported, while "forgetting" to mention that it was occupied by soldiers hostile to those carrying out the bombing. The aim is to highlight the "barbarity" of those carrying out the bombing. Of course, information is always partial in the sense that it cannot tell the whole story of what happened, which would be uninteresting anyway. But in the case of information manipulation, the aim is to provoke a feeling of horror and disgust, in line with the reaction that the disinformer wishes to elicit.

"Augmented" information. This consists of adding details to the information itself in order to elicit the desired reaction from the producers of the information, whether it be a reaction of horror or admiration, or a moral reaction.

Decontextualised information. Every event has a context (historical, cultural, political, etc.) that tends to explain it. Decontextualisation consists of extracting it from this context, which tends to explain both why it happened and how and why it happened, in order to implicitly substitute the frame of reference of the recipient of the information or what they believe to be the context of the event. Like partial information, it is therefore a form of deception by omission.

3. The need for a critical mind when faced with information

Bias in information and attempts to influence judgement go largely unnoticed. As a result, what everyone believes they know actually corresponds to what they are being led to believe in order to elicit the desired behaviour from them by the entities (individuals or institutions) that originate the 'information' or contribute to its dissemination. And so, one of two things happens:

a) It is possible to be satisfied with this, either for the sake of convenience, or because of an unquestioning trust in the source of information, or because of a lack of interest.

b) Or we can seek to keep ourselves properly informed. This is not easy because misinformation is omnipresent, we often allow ourselves to be seduced, we do not have the time or even the opportunity to check everything, and we often allow ourselves to be fooled because we have not paid attention. Just as we are scammed on the Internet or by an unscrupulous trader.

The risk of falling for disinformation techniques is all the greater because the information increasingly concerns areas with which the recipient is unfamiliar. As a result, they cannot easily make an informed judgement. When it comes to things that are familiar to them, they don't have too much of a problem. They can more or less easily distinguish between what is probably true and what is probably false or partially false. But the same cannot be said for many other things:

a) things that are far removed from the subject's areas of interest or expertise,

b) things that are new compared to what they thought they knew based on their belief system,

c) things that challenge their worldview, but also the principles or moral values that they took for granted and used as references. However, these reference values can serve as benchmarks, but also as obstacles to understanding what is happening around them.

d) It is therefore important to exercise critical thinking to the fullest. On the one hand, we must guard against 'false prophets', whose discourse is often self-serving; on the other hand, we must admit that things do not necessarily correspond to what we imagined or hoped for. Hence the need to question the quality of the information you receive: where does it come from? Is what it claims to be true, or at least probable? What does it mean? How should it be understood? What conclusions should be drawn from it?

First of all, it is important to distinguish between the raw facts, as reported, and the commentary that often surrounds them in the words of the journalist or press service that originated them. The raw facts can be summed up in a few words, while the commentary takes up much more space. The commentary,

in fact, has no more value than the opinion of the person who formulates it, bearing in mind that they are not necessarily an expert on the subject they are dealing with, especially if it is somewhat complex, they have little time to produce their copy and they do not necessarily have the leisure to investigate the subject in greater depth.

Added to this is the fact that this description of the raw facts, as reported, is not necessarily above suspicion either. It may have been invented for the journalist, higher up in the information chain to which he or she belongs (*fake news*), or it may be incomplete in relation to reality.

This is why it is important to be wary of information that has been truncated or distorted, either unintentionally or deliberately, in order to mislead the recipient of the information and elicit the desired reaction. Depending on whether the bombing is described as having killed civilians or struck an enemy trench, the reaction will not be the same.

Raw and complete information is what characterises its quality. The problem is that the recipient can never be sure of this quality. They must therefore: try to 'source' the information by trying to find out who is behind it. A press office is obviously less reliable than a news agency, which is itself less reliable than the result of an investigation carried out 'in the field' by the informant themselves; compare the information presented by different sources that are independent of each other; sometimes they are only independent in appearance; similarly, it is appropriate to give more credence to information whose origin is specified *("according to the press office of the Ministry of the Interior..."*) than to information whose origin is not specified; here, two observations:

a) information deemed dubious when found in one media outlet may appear to be confirmed by the opinion of an expert expressing themselves in another;

b) highly dubious information may, through repetition, come to be regarded as self-evident.

Develop a scale of value for information; this scale could be as follows:

- ✓ highly probable
- ✓ probable
- ✓ plausible
- ✓ unlikely
- ✓ highly improbable
- ✓ impossible.

Here, two things should be noted:

a) unverifiable information can be corroborated and made relevant because it deals with a fact that is linked to another fact which has been the subject of verifiable information, thus dealing with an event that can be considered highly probable;

b) some facts, even those of the utmost importance, may remain unverifiable and remain so for a long time; it is never possible to access reality in its entirety, especially when certain authorities are working to conceal or distort it.

It is by juggling the information at one's disposal, some more certain than others, some more improbable, that it becomes possible to form a picture of the whole situation. This personal assessment must be distinguished from that which influential powers seek to impose through disinformation. Furthermore, it is always provisional because it can (and must) be constantly compared with other information, the integration of which may alter one's assessment of the situation as a whole.

4. A prerequisite for the search for lasting peace

Taking a step back from immediate appearances and maintaining a critical mindset towards sources of information that seek to promote beliefs that are not in line with hidden interests are prerequisites for any pursuit of peace. Peace cannot be sustainably based on a unilateral or biased view of the situation that disregards the other party's perspective. Any effort to resolve a conflict or, better still, to avoid confrontation, therefore involves placing oneself on a different level of reality from that of the protagonists, who are locked into their certainties and immediate interests.[1]

When dealing with local issues, it can be relatively easy to make this transition from the reality of each individual actor to a broader, more comprehensive level. This is not the case when the conflicts that arise here and there around the world are manifestations of a much larger tectonic shift from one world order to another. Perhaps we should even distinguish between three distinct changes: the balance between declining and emerging political powers; the balance between Western culture and the cultures it has imposed itself upon over the last few centuries; and, finally, the relationship between techno-industrial civilisation itself and its relationship with the rest of the living world.

[1] Cf. Hubert Landier, *Mediation and Transdisciplinarity, Navigating Conflicts in Times of Crisis*, Springer, 2025.