

Practices of Control and Disinformation in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War

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Sources

Source A

Disinformation meant the targeted feeding of specially prepared false data to the enemy in order to disorient it and illicit a response (decisions, measures) that would weaken or otherwise disadvantage it. The disinformation also included some truthful, easily verifiable data to give the rest of the information an aura of credibility, which is what made it difficult to uncover. Disinformation could also be contained in false documents, oral or written agency communications, and could be disseminated by the media and specially issued printed matter. Detecting disinformation was a very important task when reviewing intelligence and materials. Disinformation could be a product of the enemy's special services, but also a product of an initiative by a secret collaborator without the involvement of special services.

Disinformation [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on iBadatelna.cz, Documentation portal on Czechoslovak State securityS: <https://ibadatelna.cz/en/dictionary/disinformation>.

Source B

The present can be defined as a post-fact, post-truth era, where facts and information have lost their value. Where emotions play a primary role. This is of course also related to the development of the Internet and social networks through which we get a huge amount of information. It is also related to the functioning of the human brain. People are more attracted to photos and short “explosive messages” and less often concern themselves with the origins or truthfulness of the same. It's convenient to form an opinion quickly and cheaply. This is what most of us do. But therein lies the risk of falling prey to various forms of manipulation.

Why is the strategy of spreading misinformation, fake news and hoaxes internally within democratic countries so successful?

The risk to democracy is all the greater because we live in a time of mobs. A mob does not necessarily mean only a large gathering of people in one particular physical place. It may well be the gathering of (dissatisfied, frustrated) people on social networks who are influenced by interaction, where their shared emotions based on a specific stimulus play a central role.

The masses, under the sway of strong emotions, with atomised individuals, can be easily manipulated (in the age of the Internet and social networks, real social interaction is even rarer and the spreading of lies ever easier). In the past, this socio-psychological phenomenon and its purposeful reinforcement by propaganda, deliberate manipulation and the spreading of lies ushered into power those for whom other people were merely a means of acquiring that power. They then exercised their power above all to suppress the freedoms and rights of all others.

It would be naive to think that this is all a thing of the past. There will always be groups that will use these phenomena to their advantage, create, promote and spread disinformation, fake news and hoaxes, trying to mould the world into “their own image”. Without true and verified information and facts, it is hard to trust anything. A targeted attack on truthful, verified information is an attack on trust. If we do not believe anything, do not trust institutions, laws, or the people around us, we can end up lonely, isolated, and disoriented. Everything [*sic.*] can end in apathetically dismissing the world, or an [*sic.*] escape to where we feel the guarantee of certainty, some kind of “order”, which can easily be in the arms of an authoritarian [*sic.*]. Apathy and fear of freedom are a guaranteed recipe for the onset of various forms of totalitarianism. This is what happened in the past, and those who inherited the thinking of totalitarian rulers know this and continue to use it.

Martin Slávik, ‘We are at war and we must defend ourselves’, 22 November 2019 [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Minulost.cz: <https://www.minulost.cz/en/we-are-war-and-we-must-defend-ourselves>.

Source C

Excerpt of the Czechoslovak Minister of Interior Rudolf Barák's speech on the fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Main Directorate for Press Oversight (HSTD), April 1958

In addition to education, literature and art have played an important role in socialist re-education in the past. Press, radio and television have become significant cultural and educational forces [...]. There is hardly a family in the republic that is not influenced by at least one of these. This illustrates their great significance and the need for all these institutions to serve the people faithfully under the guiding hand of the party. The responsibility of all communists on the entire cultural front has been growing. This also applies to the communists (that is to say virtually all workers) at press oversight. [...]

Press oversight is part of the Ministry of the Interior and must strengthen its ties with the StB [state secret police] operations. Press oversight is a political instrument and must work completely under the control and direction of the party.

Peter Rendek, '(Dis)information war against its own people. A brief look at Czechoslovak history', 13 December 2019 [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Minulost.cz: <https://www.minulost.cz/en/disinformation-war-against-its-own-people-brief-look-czechoslovak-history>.

Source D

The [communist] regime therefore did not hesitate to shoot those trying to cross the border or to invade people's privacy. Up until as late as November 1989 the regime obtained its private information through the [...] clandestine correspondence control unit correspondence surveillance. This task was handled by Directorate VI of the FMV (Federal Ministry of the Interior), and special workplaces were set up at selected post offices in all regional cities. These workplaces were manned by StB [state secret police] personnel trained in this area. The surveillance of correspondence was largely focused on correspondence with "capitalist countries". This channel of information was an important source of news for the state security forces and the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Before November 1989, Section 2 of Directorate VI of the SNB (National Security Corps) – Intelligence Equipment

Directorate of the SNB – was in charge of this nationwide surveillance of the population’s post. [...].

Peter Rendek, ‘Surveilling the nation’s correspondence as a part of information warfare’, 21 October 2019 [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Minulost.cz: <https://www.minulost.cz/en/surveilling-nations-correspondence-part-information-warfare>.

CDTR Archive [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Minulost.cz.
<https://www.minulost.cz/pictures/dezininfo/pracoviste.jpg>
fo/pracoviste.jpg



**The workplace of the state secret police (StB) –
Directorate VI of the Federal Ministry of the Interior
– as it used to look.**

Source E

Black propaganda is a form of propaganda intended to create the impression that it was created by those it is supposed to discredit. [...]

The major characteristic of black propaganda is that the audience is not aware that someone is influencing them, and do not feel that they are being pushed in a certain direction. Black propaganda purports to emanate from a source other than the true source. This type of propaganda is associated with covert psychological operations. Sometimes the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions. Black propaganda is the “big lie”, including all types of

creative deceit. Black propaganda relies on the willingness of the receiver to accept the credibility of the source. If the creators or senders of the black propaganda message do not adequately understand their intended audience, the message may be misunderstood, seem suspicious, or fail altogether.

Governments conduct black propaganda for reasons that include: A) by disguising their direct involvement, a government may be more likely to succeed in convincing an otherwise unbelieving target audience, and B) there are diplomatic reasons behind the use of black propaganda. Black propaganda is necessary to obfuscate a government's involvement in activities that may be detrimental to its foreign policies.

Black Propaganda [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_propaganda.

Source F

1960s: Operation Neptune

[...]

In this 1964 disinformation operation, the Czechoslovak secret service, working with the KGB, participated in the sinking and staged [the] discovery of four chests of Nazi intelligence documents which had been forged and made to appear as if they had been underwater since World War II. These documents were designed to discredit Western politicians by revealing names of former Nazi informants who were still being used as spies in Eastern Europe. Ladislav Bittman, the Czechoslovak agent who defected to the West in 1968, originally placed the documents in Cerne Jezero, the Black Lake, and later led the divers, who were part of a documentary team, to make the discovery. Bittman, who ran the operation, stated, "It was the Cold War, and the goal was to re-awaken interest and discredit West German politicians. Another goal was to have the statute of limitations for war criminals, which would have expired in 1965, extended. Following the extensive media coverage, the countries that suffered during WWII demanded that the statute be prolonged. Germany eventually extended it and then agreed that there be no limited time in which their war criminals could be tried."

Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski, 'Disinformation – Дезинформация (*Dezinformatsiya*)', *The Cyber Defense Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2018, pp. 21–28.

Source G

Established at the beginning of the Cold War to transmit uncensored news and information to audiences behind the Iron Curtain, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) played a significant role in the collapse of communism and the rise of democracies in post-communist Europe. [...]

Radio Free Europe was founded in 1950 and initially broadcast to Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Three years later, Radio Liberty began broadcasting to the Soviet Union in Russian and 15 other national languages. RFE/RL began broadcasts to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1975.

Initially, both RFE and RL were funded principally by the U.S. Congress through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), but RFE also received supplemental private donations.

In 1971, all CIA involvement ended, and thereafter RFE and RL were funded by Congressional appropriation through the Board for International Broadcasting (BIB) and after 1995 the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The two corporations were merged into RFE/RL, Inc. in 1976.

[...]

In what came to be called “surrogate” broadcasting, RFE and RL provided an unbiased, professional substitute for the free media that countries behind the Iron Curtain lacked. Unlike other Western broadcasters, the programs focused on local news not covered in state-controlled domestic media, as well as religion, science, sports, Western music, and locally banned literature and music.

The “radios” provided news, features, and music aimed at communist and non-communist elites as well as the general population. RFE and RL also gave a voice to dissidents and opposition movements that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, would emerge as leaders of the new post-communist democracies.

A. Ross Johnson, ‘History’, Copyright (c)2022 RFE/RL, Inc. Used with the permission of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1201 Connecticut Ave NW, Ste 400, Washington DC 20036 [accessed 18 November 2022]. Available on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: <https://pressroom.rferl.org/history>.

Source H

Excerpt from Václav Havel's essay, 'The Power of the Powerless', 1978

When I speak of living within the truth, I naturally do not have in mind only products of conceptual thought, such as a protest or a letter written by a group of intellectuals. It can be any means by which a person or a group revolts against manipulation: anything from a letter by intellectuals to a workers' strike, from a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike, for instance. If the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life, then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power. [...]

In societies under the post-totalitarian system, all political life in the traditional sense has been eliminated. People have no opportunity to express themselves politically in public, let alone to organise politically. [...] Yet even in such societies, individuals and groups of people exist who do not abandon politics as a vocation and who, in one way or another, strive to think independently, to express themselves and in some cases even to organise politically, because that is a part of their attempt to live within the truth. The fact that these people exist and work is in itself immensely important and worthwhile. [...] Once again, there is ample evidence for this process in Czechoslovakia. Almost all those who were political prisoners in the early 1970s, who had apparently been made to suffer in vain because of their quixotic efforts to work politically among an utterly apathetic and demoralised society, belong today – inevitably – among the most active Chartists. In Charter 77 [is] the moral legacy of their earlier sacrifices.

Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless: East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures', 2018, 32(2), pp. 353–408.