



Cover picture: Technicians move furniture on stage during the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2024. “Disinformation and misinformation” ranked first among the threats discussed there. By 2025, this had slipped to second place. Image: Michael Buholzer/dpa

All “disinformation”? – How the state interferes with freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

The battle for the minds and affections of foreign and domestic populations is being fought with great intensity. This also has consequences for Germany.

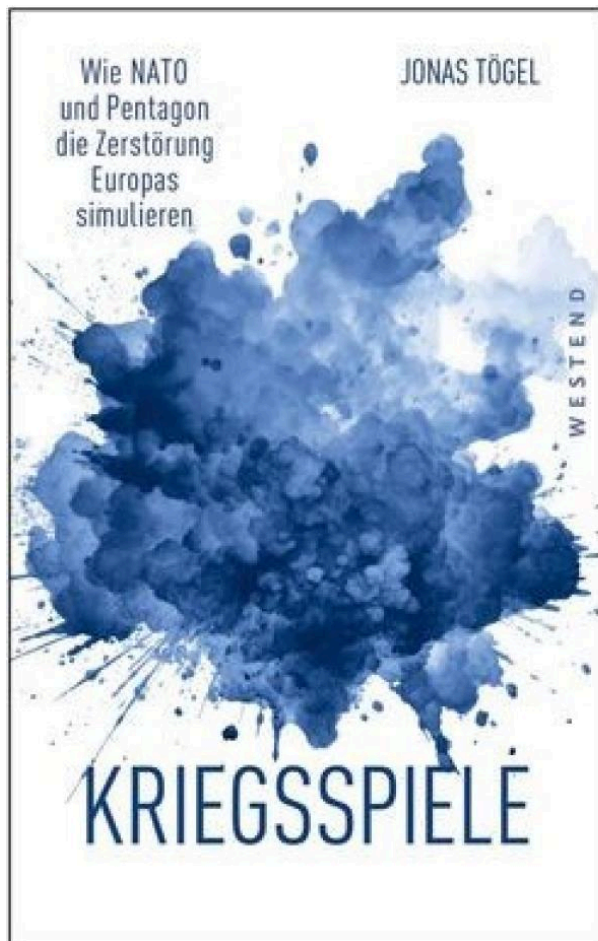
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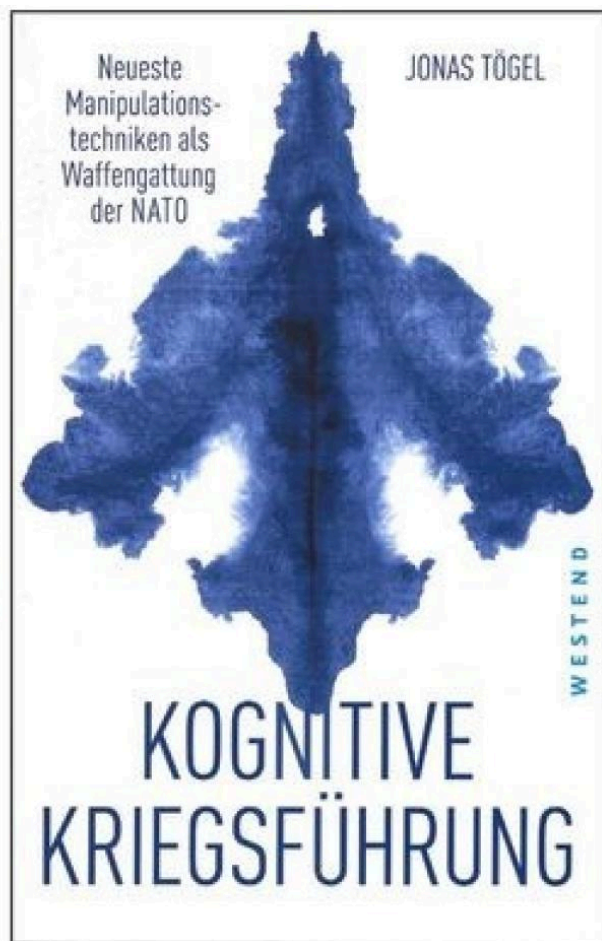
Cognitive warfare

When discussing the “engine room” of cognitive warfare, it is first necessary to explain what cognitive warfare actually is. Since a detailed discussion of the topic would go beyond the scope of this article, a brief outline will suffice here: it is an official NATO program that serves as an umbrella term for information warfare, psychological operations, and psychological warfare, and has been increasingly promoted since 2020. The battle for people's minds is thus being turned into a separate warfare technique, with the declared aim of making people themselves an independent, official NATO theater of war. This means that every person is at the center of this state-of-the-art psychological warfare at all times.

Neither the radical nature nor the comprehensiveness of this global program, which is also being pursued by Russia, China, and other countries under different names, can be discussed in depth here. However, it is important to understand that control over the dominant narrative in societies is an essential component of cognitive warfare. In this context, NATO declares the fight against “disinformation” to be a key task in order to ensure the “cognitive security” of the population. A document states: "The most efficient way to defeat an adversary is to influence their [sic] thoughts and beliefs and turn them against themselves. Advances in research on disinformation and its impact on societies will lead to the development of new battle plans to ward off these attacks."



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The narrative framework: Combating “disinformation” and “Russian influence”

Since the battle for the minds and affections of foreign and domestic populations cannot be waged legally, this statement by NATO strategists provides the interpretive framework that legitimizes the advancement of cognitive warfare: the fight against disinformation or foreign influence.

It is therefore not surprising that at the World Economic Forum meeting in January 2025, this fight against “disinformation and misinformation” was at the top of the list of threats. Apparently, it was expected that “disinformation” could be effectively combated in the coming years, as the outlook for the next ten years moved this threat down to fifth place. The EU declared war on “disinformation” back in 2018, and together with the fight against “Russian influence”, it has been omnipresent since the development of cognitive warfare, if not before. As early as 2017, a study by the Army War College warned that “uncomfortable information could reveal details that undermine legitimate authority and destroy the relationship between governments and the governed.” The goal must therefore be to “manipulate perception” as comprehensively as possible—a tactic that has been

recognized as an official warfare technique since the introduction of cognitive warfare at the latest and which also includes the fight against ‘disinformation’ or “Russian propaganda”.

In this context, the Berliner Zeitung, Focus, NDR, and NachDenkSeiten were recently accused of spreading “Russian narratives” by the Bavarian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution in its so-called «Doppelgängeranalyse» (“look-alike-analysis”). After vehement criticism, for example from the editor-in-chief of the Berliner Zeitung, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution backtracked.

However, as is so often the case in propaganda research, the problem with terms such as “disinformation” or “misinformation” is that they are not sufficiently defined. Furthermore, the evidence for “Russian influence” often remains unclear.

Susanne Lackner, deputy chair of the media regulatory authority in Austria, recently explained this very weakness in the supposed fight against “disinformation”, for which, in her words, there is no “uniform legal concept”. Since “freedom of expression” already exists, criticism has been voiced that “censorship is taking place here”, but that is “not the point at all”, according to Lackner. Lisa Paus, Federal Minister for Family Affairs from the Green Party, takes a similar view. She recently lamented, “Many enemies of democracy know exactly what still falls under freedom of expression”, and consequently called for a fight against “hate and incitement”.

The alleged fight against “disinformation” and “Russian influence” thus forms a powerful narrative framework for the bitter war being waged for our minds and hearts. This article will focus on the mechanisms that have been created behind the scenes, often invisible to the general public, in order to effectively implement these manipulative efforts.

Two specific, particularly effective mechanisms stand out: the creation of a suitable legal framework in the form of the “Digital Services Act” and the establishment of a network of think tanks dedicated to information warfare.

The implementation: think tanks

The fight against “Russian disinformation” will also dominate the 2025 federal election campaign: the “Correctiv” platform is certain that Russia will interfere in it. In this context, there has even been speculation that Russia could have something to do with the terrorist attacks in Aschaffenburg or Munich in order to strengthen nationalist parties.

However, a study published in 2021 by the Left Group in the European Parliament fundamentally questions the interpretative framework of an alleged fight against “foreign influences,” usually from Russia or China. The authors described it instead as “a convenient source of imagined threats to European security” that serves to “justify new defense projects and initiatives”.

They also note: “A booming industry of NATO-affiliated think tanks and institutes has emerged, reinforcing the political agenda of ‘foreign influence’. These are regularly invited to hearings of the special committee to contribute tailor-made expertise.” The goal must therefore be to closely examine the ramified network of Western think tanks that are shaping public opinion behind the scenes.

This includes, for example, the Institute for Strategic Dialogues (ISD), founded in 2006, which, according to research by Public, is also a NATO (front) organization. “NGOs funded by NATO and governments are working with government agencies to influence elections in Germany,” Public criticizes the ISD. The institute's task is to “bring the German population into line with the goals of American foreign policy and to undermine the European peace movement”.

The two authors therefore offer harsh criticism: “Groups such as the ISD serve as important channels for military and state propaganda.”

This accusation also applies to NATO's 28 so-called “centers of excellence,” two of which are highlighted as examples: the Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, based in Estonia and founded in 2008, and the Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Latvia, founded in 2014. Both are dedicated to intensive research and development of increasingly modern propaganda techniques, as the Left Group study found.

Similarly influential is the East StratCom Task Force, founded in 2015, which, like the Center Against Hybrid Threats, is a joint project of the EU and NATO.

The former task force runs the blog “EU vs. Disinfo”, which recently warned of Russian influence on the German federal election. Key narratives spread by the Kremlin and thus to be combated include “elites vs. the people”, “lost sovereignty”, and “impending collapse”.

The “Center Against Hybrid Threats” is also dedicated to combating “disinformation campaigns by the Kremlin,” among other things.

Implementation: The Digital Services Act

In addition to this extensive network of think tanks, the creation of (censorship) laws is another key tool for shaping public opinion in the engine room of cognitive warfare.

First and foremost among these is the Digital Services Act, which has been in force since November 16, 2022. This very comprehensive and complex law replaces the 2018 Network Enforcement Act in Germany, which was already criticized by Human Rights Watch for potentially leading to “unjustified censorship.”

The DSA is primarily aimed at digital search engines and platforms, obliging them, under threat of severe penalties, to monitor, downgrade, and, if necessary, delete their content, which is controlled by the EU Commission and monitored by government coordinators and civil society whistleblowers.

The main focus is on combating the vague concept of “disinformation”, including in connection with elections, as Susanne Lackner emphasizes: "There is disinformation, which is when there is an intention behind it, i.e., to spread misleading content. Then there is the influencing of information, which of course brings us into the realm of foreign and security policy and foreign interference. [...] The other thing is, of course, interference, and everyone is now realizing in the run-up to the elections and election preparations that there are serious dangers on the internet. [...] In other words, disinformation is a means of warfare."

The heavy penalties are particularly effective, causing a certain amount of fear among platform operators—after all, they can cost them “up to six percent of their global turnover” if they violate the DSA.

Civil society whistleblowers also include so-called “trusted flaggers”. Since October 2024, the reporting office RESpect! has been responsible for this in Germany.

While the DSA and RESpect! effectively enable the implementation of cognitive warfare, there is loud criticism of their compatibility with fundamental principles of the rule of law. For example, the “Welt” newspaper criticizes RESpect! as the “nice new censorship authority” and says its actions are “in open contradiction to the rule of law”.

In his analysis of the DSA, long-standing judge Manfred Kölsch writes: “In doing so, they are undermining the constitutionally enshrined freedom of expression and information and promoting this endeavor through a Europe-wide surveillance system.”

Conclusion: concrete examples

Since the DSA and the numerous think tanks in the engine room of manipulation operate unnoticed in the background, the question arises as to where their influence can be observed in concrete terms.

One possibility is to report undesirable content using “trusted flaggers” and force its deletion or, even more efficiently and almost impossible to verify, a downgrading of its visibility: in this way, unpopular content disappears into the depths of the internet, receiving little attention or becoming completely invisible, a practice also known as shadow banning.

During a meeting with Interior Minister Nancy Faeser on January 22 at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, “representatives of social media companies” were already prepared to respond appropriately to “the dissemination of criminal Internet content and disinformation in connection with the federal elections”.

Another equally important aspect that many think tanks are working hard on is telling their own (NATO) story. As Joshua Rahtz impressively explains in his article “The Storytellers of NATO”, the proposals are extremely ambitious and make it clear how many areas of society are now permeated by cognitive warfare. Referring to proposals from the think tank “Globsec”, Rahtz argues that, among other things, the entire infotainment industry, such as online games and fiction, should be integrated into NATO's storytelling. “Popular Hollywood films and online streaming services” should also be included. “NATO should also strive to attract more appealing influencers, both inside and outside the NATO bubble, to promote its own storytelling”, according to Globsec.

Such an all-encompassing production of propaganda, deep from the engine room of cognitive warfare, can only be countered by continuous education about how it works and the profoundly undemocratic foundations on which it is based.

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