EXPLOITING OPEN SOURCES IN THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION AND COUNTERACTING MEDIA MANIPULATION

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Abstract: The diversity of sources and domains conducive to the collection of useful information in decision making has experienced exponential development with the evolution of the Internet. The focus of the public attention on the online environment in the detriment of the traditional media is mainly determined by the variety of ways of presenting information in the New Media and their ability to propagate them. The online environment has become a battlefield where information helps, inflates, manipulates, being a real challenge for the specialists who validate and exploit these open sources. In the almost endless volume of data, it is a challenge to select the most relevant and useful ones in the policy of national security.

Keywords: public information; national security; open source; fake news; New Media

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last years the preponderance of the information society has become increasingly visible, growing exponentially, and the access of a certain public to information has been facilitated by the development of new communication technologies. The New Media concept has been rapidly embraced by both citizens and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) followers who are looking for data-generating information relevant to national security policies:

> The increasing access and real-time access to information is now a fact and at the same time a consequence of what is known as the "OSINT revolution", transforming open sources of information into an extremely important capability for the work of intelligence and policy formulation in the field of national security (SRI, 2020a)

The transformation of data into information that constitutes real resources that underlie the social functionality represents a very interesting aspect. The difference in their usefulness is realized by the diverse way in which the members of the civil society or the specialists refer to it.

Studies reveal that reporting is made according to the degree of knowledge of the field from which the information is generated, but also by other subjective considerations, such as personal or group interests. The perception of the value and usefulness of the information will prove to be equally subjective. The focus of the public attention on the online environment to the detriment of the traditional media is mainly determined by the variety of ways of presenting information in the New Media and their ability to propagate. The online world has become a battlefield where information helps, inflates, manipulates, representing a real challenge for the specialists who validate and exploit these open sources. In this endless volume of data, it is a real challenge to select the most relevant and useful ones in the national security policy.

Of course, there are two different ways of understading the information (the people refer to information in another way than specialists). The comments on social media about how to manage, for example, the crisis generated by the emergence of so-called "biological weapons" - coronavirus, a weapon that was thought about 5 years ago in Chinese laboratories, are revealing. Communications of various types in continuous flow on the entire media and new media channels showed, to a large extent, the communicative behavior, in which almost no one took into account the limits of competence and understanding, and messages containing both real and false content, were amplified by the power of spreading of the online environment. The temptation to spread almost all types of content, videos, audio, images, but especially texts containing various methods of countering the "enemy", official and especially unofficial, has increased in a considerable way.

The result in this kind of situations is the direct entry, having no psychological training, into a field of confrontation with an unseen enemy, with largely unknown identification data, which, at least for now, wins "battle" after the battle, "conquering" territory after territory, all over the world. The amplification of misleading information as a result of the spread in the New Media leads to the obstruction of the mission of OSINT specialists. This is a conclusion after doing an analysis of open sources, as we will show below.

Even the representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO) have introduced a new term, saying that we are dealing with a true "Infodemia". This term represents an abundance of information, both correct and false, which makes it difficult for people to access reliable sources and disorients them. In the Republic of Moldova, for example, in mid-March 2020, the Information and Security Service decided to block over 50 portals during the state of emergency that, in the shadow of anonymity, would have spread manipulative and false news about COVID-19, according to the *Europa liberă* post (Ceapai, 2020).

On the other hand, A. Bârgăoanu, told *Radio Romania Actualități* that,

> misinformation is now at the system level, it comes across the information ecosystem, on classic TVs, even on radio, on classic social networks, but also on WhatsApp, as a source of information and conversation. (Bârgăoanu, 2020).

A. Bârgăoanu believes that there are even more dangerous forms of misinformation, such as those packaged in the form of conspiracy theories, in this sense that there is a global trend. Therefore, the communication specialist, A. Bârgăoanu states that we must collect the information from official sources, from the authorities, but for the population to trust the authorities, the communication must be transparent and systematic. She talks about a conspiracy theory that has geopolitical inflections of two types. A conspiracy according to which the virus was created in China and an opposite conspiracy, according to which the virus was created in America. Another conspiracy theory is that which denies the existence of the crisis and the size of the tragedy in Italy. All this leads to people's disorientation to superficiality in addressing national security measures recommended by WHO. Indeed, the World Health Organization was sounding an alarm:

> All sections of our society - including businesses and employers - must play an active role if we are to stop the spread of this disease worldwide (WHO, 2020).

On the other hand, Chinese press is again in the spotlight, both in terms of dissemination of official information and analysis, and when it comes to manipulation, fake news or hiding information that if it were published in time the power of this biological enemy would have been limited. At the end of March 2020 Reporters sans frontieres writes that the planet would not have been a pandemic if the Chinese press had been free:

> If the Chinese media were free, the coronavirus would not have become a pandemic, according to an analysis published by Reporters sans frontiers (RSF) (Fati, 2020)."

The analysis was based on a research from Southampton University, which revealed the fact that the number of cases of disease with the new virus in China could have been reduced by 86% if measures to combat the epidemic had been taken two weeks earlier than January 20th. The RSF analysis timeline showed on October 18, 2019 that the Chinese press should have talked about the frightening results of a coronavirus pandemic simulation by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which would have resulted in 65 million deaths in a year and a half.

> If the Chinese Internet was not isolated from a system developed by electronic censorship and journalists were not compelled to follow the instructions of the Communist Party, the public and the authorities would undoubtedly have been interested in this information coming from the US and echoing the SARS epidemic, severe acute respiratory syndrome, which caused over 800 deaths and affected 8,000 people, especially in China, in 2003 (RSF, 2020).

Only on the 11th of January 2020, after registering the first death, important information was free to go being helped by researchers, with the imminent risk of closing the laboratory. This is because after January 3, eight doctors were detained by the police for spreading "false rumors", following a call through the rapid alert system of December 30 that could have been taken over by the media. Forcing the censorship of keywords related to the epidemic of the WeChat social network, used by over 1 billion people in China, on the one hand prevented the press from distributing informative journalistic materials and prophylactic measures, and on the other, the population to have access to this vital information, the RSF study shows.

If the Chinese authorities had played the book of transparency, they would have immediately communicated the sequencing of the coronavirus genome to the scientific press, allowing the international community to gain valuable time in its research to develop a proper vaccine (RSF, 2020)

2. MODELING THE MEANING OF INFORMATION

As we can observe, the control of information and the modeling of their meanings represent a real challenge in the context of the development, in today's society, of the new types of media, the results obtained being a real strategic resource. And this is after the old threats, such as organized crime or espionage, add new ones, related to population health or cyber, but not only.

These are becoming more difficult to manage due to their diffuse and disorganized typology, but with multiple interdependencies.

The holders of interests in the area of communicating information on a large scale sometimes operate on beliefs and behaviors not only at the level of individuals or at the level of market segments, but even at the scale of social macrostructures, creating the possibility of very vulnerabilities to national security. Thus, maintaining the normality between the right and the need to access public information, on the one hand, and the obligation to secrete certain types of information in order not to undermine national security, represents an increasingly complex activity for all social vectors involved in the processes of obtaining and disseminating information (Ghişa & Frunzetti, 2018)

Some administrations resort to security strategies in which specialized services work with government or civilian institutions, while also empowering citizens to get involved individually. Thus, gradually, it has been found that more benefits bring cooperation and open sources along with those of trust, than maintaining the cult of secrecy. The new technology, the development of the media and propaganda have facilitated the loss by the state of the exclusivity of the possession of the information power resources and the generous transfer to the so-called non-state that can use them to the detriment of the security interests, even at the global level. These evolutions, which amplify the uncertainties, also determined the transformation of the intelligence process, conditioning the information structures to resort to changes in tactical management.

Irs now, the online environment has been a real battleground in which information helps, inflates, manipulates, being a real challenge for the

specialists who validate and exploit these open sources, called, in specialized language, Open Source Intelligence. In the almost endless volume of data, it is a real challenge to select the relevant and useful ones in the national security policy.

Abundance of expression tools, from online pages belonging to traditional media (TVs, radios, newspapers), to blogs, websites, social media accounts or forums, the more and more diverse content provided by their members, sometimes in other languages, than those of the host country, there are real challenges for Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) users:

As a complex, specialized and distinct process, Open Source Intelligence integrates the human experience with the data obtained from open sources, in order to produce information and informative documents relevant to national security decisions or policies, these open sources gaining increasing significance in managing security risks (SRI, 2020a).

The complexity of the information environment and the speed of information transmission, whether true, false or biased, is, in fact, open-ended, allowing anyone access to data that was previously only available in circles of influence and power. Thus, Open Source Intelligence specialists need to adapt to the increasingly dynamic online environment in order to go through the stages of the OSINT process, which involves collecting, processing, analyzing, disseminating and feedback:

Easy access to information hides another reality: being informed is not enough. The information needs to be validated and processed to become an intelligence product. This process requires technique, means and time, that is the price that must be paid in order to become an informed, intelligence holder (SRI, 2020b).

This is why the training and training of OSINT specialists must be continuous and adapted to the new challenges, in order to make resources more efficient. Continuous and constant training also appears as a necessity for the dynamics of technological transformations that take into account the easier exploitation of the data volume:

Emergence of the new paradigms of intelligence activity, focused on the need to impose the collaborative working model, specifically OSINT, respectively on the principle of adaptability in intelligence work and increasing the capacity of reaction, in real time, in the case of events with potential impact on the state of national security, at the same time, are important steps in the evolution of

information services. There are also significant challenges from the point of view of the training of the personnel (SRI, 2020a).

3. THE MAN AT THE CENTER OF THE INTELLIGENCE PROCESS

The analysis of open sources places the man at the center of the intelligence process, whose training and analytical capacity depends on the result obtained, the discovery of the relevant content in the huge and diverse volume of information provided by the new media, but not only.

The management of OSINT, especially those related to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, has proven to be extremely important both for the authorities of the affected states and for the representatives of the economic environment. From the great magnates of the world to the representatives of smaller companies, all of them have shown their interest in co-opting specialists to collect and control information and have the ability to model their meanings. In the context of the danger of widespread contamination with the new type of virus, for example, an Indian company manager (GDP CHURN (P) Ltd. Loves coding), Manish Srivastava, even launched a call to join an Open-source project for virus outbreaks, supporting open sources of information through funding, showing that this virus was both lethal to people, but also to the economy of the world.

> I plan to bring some good developers, universities, research institutes on board, to develop an OSINT (Open Source Intelligent System) for human race health issues. Regardless of your expertise, I think you can contribute. We can develop an OSINT system that can help medical scientists around the world, doctors, governments or even just one person to understand how old and new diseases have spread in different geographical areas, which is the infection rate at different points on the map (Srivastava, 2020).

On the other hand, Fox Business explains that when confronted with coronavirus it is vitally important to have all the official information, but also those that in proportion of almost 90% are known as 'open-source intelligence' (OSINT).

4.CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the specialists in "deciphering" information from open sources and not only concerns the national security. On March 26, 2020, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Romanian Intelligence Service's existence, the President of the country, Klaus Iohannis, reaffirmed the role of this institution in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, recalling that the classic security challenges and threats new features are added to the state, often unpredictable:

> In this context, the more valuable your contribution becomes, the excellent analysis and anticipation capacity of the institution being of real use to the decision-makers involved in a difficult fight to stop the spread of infections with the new coronavirus.

Consistent measures are expected from national security specialists in response to situations of potential risk to security, giving them responsibilities in the most sensitive areas, including cyber-intelligence, cross-border threats, economic security, defense of constitutional rights and values, and protection of the classified information, the head of state said. It has been found that the exploitation of open sources should not be limited to electronic sources alone. Specialists in information management from open sources must build the informational puzzle with the "pieces" collected from social pages, blogs, print and online articles, radio and TV news journals, news agencies, statistics and analysis, reports and balances of companies or institutions in various fields, public reports as a result of CSAT meetings, of government, prefectural meetings, public administrations, special commissions for emergency situations.

The characteristics of this large network, the Internet, designed to facilitate the exchange of data and information in various fields, are on the one hand related to the creation of facilities for users, from the possibility of maintaining relative anonymity to the viral transmission of information, and on the other hand is related to a number of difficulties in the process of identifying and validating sources. However, with the development of the possibilities of interrelation, however, the complexity of the competences regarding the search and processing of information increases significantly, the classical sources with which it operates, now passing mainly in the virtual space, without borders, practically. Thus, the problem of validating both the information and the source appears. Spreading information across multiple platforms and networks at the same time, sometimes without mentioning the author, raises several issues to resolve, such as finding out the initial source and filtering content to eliminate repetitive information. Thus redundancy appears, as prof. A. Lesenciuc showed:

> Redundancy, understood as an information surplus in telecommunications, an unnecessary abundance of

expressions in communication, is usually negatively connected not only in the sciences fueled by information theory. Exception is only the case of increasing the stability of the communication channel against the external disruptive actions, in which case the redundancy plays the important role of recovering the altered information, the errors can be corrected and no re-transmission is necessary (Lesenciuc *et al.*, 2011).

It has been found that, in fact, although an increasing amount of information is generated with the development of New Media, the level of relevant information remains almost constant, the form in which they are presented differs depending on the interest of the issuer and the target audience. However, although the amount of relevant information remains almost constant, given the very large volume of information in general, the effort to identify and select those that matter in the national security equation is increasing. Even in these conditions, the unclassified character, the possibilities of cooperation of the workers and the complexity of the resulting products, make OSINT an effective working field in intelligence, for the collection of necessary data in decision-making, relevant and useful in the national security policy

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