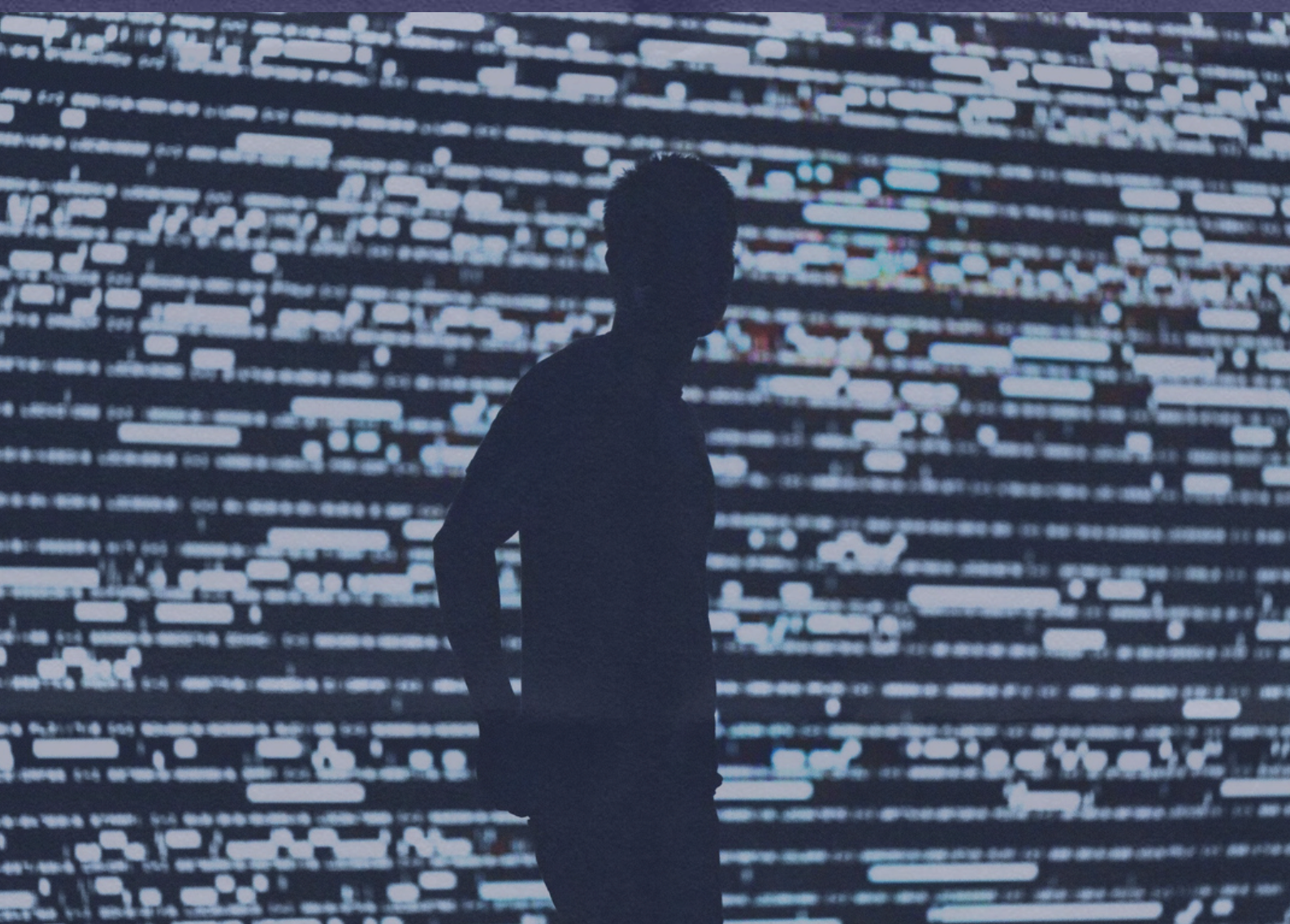




WEEKLY REPORT ON MEDIA AND INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITY

Issue n. 3

Published on Thursday, May 23, 2024



FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Recent events have seen a surge in disinformation campaigns, particularly surrounding Russia's efforts to undermine Ukraine, as the Center for Countering Disinformation reported. Russia has intensified its propaganda, claiming the Ukrainian President's term ended on May 20, despite his legitimacy under martial law and international support. Predicted disinformation for May 20-26 includes undermining the President's legitimacy, discrediting the Peace Summit in Switzerland, and spreading fake news to disrupt mobilization.

Concurrently, false claims about a helicopter crash leading to the death of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi have linked the incident to US actions, part of a broader conspiracy theory involving the US also in the attempted assassination of Slovakia's PM Robert Fico. In Slovakia, disinformation about Fico's shooting has grown, with various unproven claims fueling political tension. Additionally, false narratives about vaccines, especially AstraZeneca's withdrawal, have resurfaced.

RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE ACTIVITY

France is investigating whether Russia orchestrated the vandalism of Paris's Holocaust memorial, suspected to be part of a wider campaign linked to Russian security services. In Germany, nine individuals, including a former far-right politician, are on trial for plotting a coup, allegedly seeking Russian support. Ukraine's acting sports minister has warned athletes to avoid provocations from Russian competitors at the Olympics, suspecting them of being used for propaganda.

Meanwhile, Moscow's proposal to unilaterally redraw Baltic Sea borders - even if retracted less than 24 hours later - sparked NATO condemnation, viewed as a hybrid operation to spread fear. Additionally, the Center for Countering Disinformation reports intensified Russian propaganda under the "Maidan-3" campaign to destabilize Ukraine.

CHINESE INTERFERENCE ACTIVITY

UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps has accused China of providing "lethal aid" to Russia for its war in Ukraine, although US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Washington had not observed that China had directly provided weapons and added that he would speak with UK colleagues to better understand the Defence Secretary's comments. Additionally, China's top spy agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), has intensified its public presence, emphasizing foreign espionage threats and urging all citizens to act as national security defenders.

Researchers identified a Chinese-speaking hacking group targeting AI experts at a prominent US company, aiming to steal trade secrets amidst the US-China AI rivalry. Talking about AI, Chinese government has launched a new chatbot based on President Xi Jinping's thoughts to control online information, aiming to align AI development with the leader's vision. This initiative follows China's broader efforts to disseminate Xi's ideas through various mediums.

Moreover, US intelligence has detected Chinese and Iranian operatives creating deepfake content to influence US voters during the 2020 election, with concerns mounting about the potential use of AI-generated deepfakes in future disinformation campaigns. Canada's security intelligence chief warned about TikTok's potential for espionage, suggesting the app's user data could be accessed by the Chinese government.

MEDIA ACTIVITY

The Media Freedom coalition has raised concerns about political interference and legal threats to journalism in Italy. During an urgent advocacy mission to Rome, the MFRR highlighted unprecedented political interference in public media, legal harassment of dissenting journalists, and the potential acquisition of the AGI news agency by a member of Parliament. The MFRR delegation met with various institutional representatives and journalists to discuss the current state of media freedom. Their recommendations include legislative reforms to ensure the independence of public broadcasters, decriminalization of defamation, and transparent evaluation of the AGI acquisition. The MFRR will continue to monitor the situation and provide detailed reports to Italy and EU.

1. GLOBAL PERCEPTION OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

A recent study published on Springer's Journal of Big Data analyzed global perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on Twitter, using a dataset of over 17 million tweets in 63 languages. The researchers conducted multi-language sentiment analysis, geographical distribution assessment, and temporal correlation with daily events. Findings indicated that the conflict garnered worldwide attention, with diverse reactions from different regions. The majority of tweets expressed negative sentiments, while positive tweets mainly conveyed support and hope for those affected by the war. The study highlighted a strong correlation between significant war events, tweet volumes, and prevalent sentiments, demonstrating the substantial influence of real-time news on global public opinion.

Researchers uncovered also a significant presence of bot accounts spreading pro-conflict messages, aimed at manipulating public opinion. An analysis of 20,474 accounts associated with 34,955 pro-conflict tweets revealed many bots, underlining the challenges of misinformation and propaganda on social media. A year after the conflict began, the researchers noted consistent sentiment trends but observed shifts in tweet content influenced by evolving geopolitical events.

2. AMERICANS' WRONG PERCEPTIONS ON U.S. ECONOMY

A poll conducted exclusively for The Guardian reveals that nearly three in five Americans mistakenly believe the US is in a recession, with most blaming the Biden administration. Despite positive economic indicators such as GDP growth and low unemployment, 55% of respondents think the economy is shrinking, and 56% believe the US is in a recession. The survey also found that 49% incorrectly believe the S&P 500 is down for the year, and 49% think unemployment is at a 50-year high. Persistent inflation concerns contribute to this pessimism, with 72% of respondents indicating they think inflation is rising, despite a significant drop from its peak.

The poll also shows a partisan divide in perceptions, with Republicans more likely to view the economy negatively and blame Biden. Despite some bipartisan support for "Bidenomics" initiatives like infrastructure investments, the prevailing economic pessimism poses a significant challenge for Biden's re-election campaign. The majority of Americans express skepticism about economic news, reflecting deep-seated uncertainty and mistrust.



Russian propaganda efforts, aimed at boosting its global presence and undermining European institutions, are escalating, reports the **European Digital Media Observer (EDMO)**. Disinformation levels surged to 11% of Europe's total, with a focus likely to persist until the EU elections' aftermath, before returning to consolidate war-related narratives.

The **"Be Election Smart" campaign** promoted by EDMO and its national hubs is a key effort to educate and empower European citizens ahead of the European Parliament elections.

Launched on April 29, it runs for six weeks and aims to publish a new **"Be Election Smart" message every Monday** to enhance European citizens' **resilience against misinformation** and provide practical advice on how to identify fake news, recognize trusted sources, and critically analyze online content.

Report curated by Federica Urzo and Silvia Stellacci