New media, new threats?
Understanding communication dynamics in the age of extremisms, propaganda and "fake news"

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The problem

The claims:
• A communication “revolution”
• The “power” & “danger” of new technologies
• “Strategic communication” as solution (narratives, counter-propaganda...)
Outline

ARGUMENT

• New media do not exist in a vacuum
• Their effect depends on CONTEXT
‘all signs point to a continued deterioration of journalism. By all known political theory this means the continuation of credible democratic governance will be impossible. Hence this is a crisis of the greatest possible magnitude’ (Robert McChseney 2012)

The present crisis of Western democracy is a crisis in journalism.

Walter Lippmann 1920
Fjordman: One Week in Sweden

Posted on November 13, 2017 by Baron Bodissey

Gates of Vienna

At the siege of Vienna in 1683 Islam seemed poised to overrun Christian Europe. We are in a new phase of a very old war.

Kristian (34) dømt til 7,5 års fengsel for terrordeltakelse i Syria
Av Øyvind Thomsen 20. november, 2017

84 år gamle Kristian Michelsen fra Vestfold er dømt til fengsel i 5 år og et halvt år for terrordeltakelse i Syria.

Norske medier og politikere har adoptert islamske tabuer
Av Hans Rustad 26. november, 2017

Av Øyvind Thomsen 20. november, 2017

VG og Aftenposten er påfallende tause om at en toppsjef i deres eget selskapskår har maktet slutter etter anklager om overgrep.
THE KREMLIN AND DAESH INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

PREPARED BY THE NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
1. Algorithms, information bubbles & political polarization

- Social fragmentation comes first
• Metropolitan vs peripheral France

• Winners vs losers of globalization

• Political re-alignment along new social, cultural and territorial “faultlines”
Voting patterns in the US House of Representatives  (Andris et al. 2015)
1. Algorithms, information bubbles & political polarization

• Social fragmentation comes first
• What you are interested in is shaped by your social network
• The algorithm might amplify the effect of your network

Points to take away
→ An information bubble is based on a closed social network
→ To break an information bubble: build bridges to the network (NOT sufficient to change the algorithm!)
→ Think SOCIAL/POLITICAL rather than MEDIA
2. Fake news, journalism & public opinion

• What is fake news?
  - Deliberately misleading information
  - A rhetorical label to discredit opponents
  - Another point of view

• Is it a degeneration of journalism?
  - What is «proper» journalism?
  - What is «objectivity»?
  - What is «truth»?
  - What is a «fact» in politics?
2. Fake news, journalism & public opinion

• Is it new?
  - Rumour essential component of conflict

• Can it sway public opinion?
  - It exists because of the public!
  - Not necessarily taken at face value
  - Could have a positive function

Points to take away

→ Fake news is not only about bad journalism or propaganda
→ Want to reduce fake news? = Reduce polarization
  (fines for media giants/automatized fact-checking/media literacy
  ALONE are NOT the answer)
3. Communication at times of conflict

• High stakes change the game...
• ...including how information circulates and how it is interpreted
• We do not live in an age of “post-truth” (i.e. facts do not matter)
• BUT we do live in an age of extreme polarization (perception of existential threat)
3. Communication at times of conflict

Point to take away
The more polarized the conflict: a) the less we are willing to engage in dialogue; 2) the less “strategic communication” can change “their” minds
Conclusions: Where do we go from here?

• Increasing polarization and fragmentation
• This is NOT caused by social media or fake news
• Reduce rumour/fake news = reduce polarization
• Where are we on the curve?
• Think less about technology...
• ...and more about inclusion and equality