Creating chaos online:
disinformation and subverted post-publics

I suspect that by now Russian trolling is a phenomenon known to most people interested in the news about the Ukrainian war or any other hot military development in the world. Many will be able to recognize its work on the social media, news portals or user spaces of the Internet newspapers as disrupting and sowing disinformation and discord. On the other hand, only a few will be able to define it as an activity orchestrated by Russian special services and paid by Russian government, which it actually is and which sets it apart from other trolling activities online. However, even in the case when people know the origin, the threat may not be understood in its entirety. The Internet is full of trolling activities, according to some of its users, and Russian trolling is just one type. For the wider public this is just another inconvenient side-effect among different dangers lurking in digital spaces.

Communication and information researchers recognize the threat that is posed by Russian trolling to communication process and discourse, not to speak about democratic aims of public online communication. The number of studies of this phenomena have increased significantly after the US 2016 elections. But the book under review has especially interested me for several reasons: it explores not the Russian trolling as such, but its justification and calling out online; one of the environments the author looks at is the Lithuanian news portal delfi.lt; and the author of it is Asta Zelenkauskaitė who, though working at the University of Michigan, has grown up in Lithuania. This has attracted my attention not because of some nationalistic bias but because this scholar has experience of Soviet propaganda similar to mine and brings her experience of it to the investigation of propaganda in what she calls "post-publics". The latter are defined as online spaces for public participation living in information chaos or state of confusion (p. 257) caused by "antipublics" or the members who seek to disrupt and corrupt democratic discussion by increasing uncertainty of who participates in it, what is discussed, what its aims are and in general about any other element of discussion. When the disruption is caused by foreign interference exploiting the openness of such democratic spaces, the consequences cause grave danger on a wider scale than local confusion.

The book consists of five chapters each presenting a full-scale empirical study of different aspects of justification and calling out Russian trolling. Each chapter presents a relevant literature review and conceptual framework for the current study, though the sources of data remain the same throughout. These consist of American far-right news and opinion website Breitbart, New York Times accessible news stories and readers' comments, American social networking service Gab, and user comments found on Lithuanian news portal delfi.lt

In these five studies, the author presents different aims and ways of justifying and calling out Russian trolls that, contrary to expectations, increase disinformation, uncertainty and confusion. The communication patterns of masquerading and unmasking, causing political polarization and increasing it by deflecting the focus of the discussion to a different topic, victimizing Russian trolls as abused participants and members of regular public, discrediting and mocking media and other

institutions as well as people that try to call out the trolls, display of fears to seem weak if falling under the influence of Russian trolls are traced in each of the chapter with great clarity and discussed in the light of a specific danger that it poses to communication in general and political process in different affected countries in particular. Each study is more or less autonomous and can be read separately, but I was wondering if the chapter 4 would not be more useful if it was placed at the beginning. Though it relates to the victim playing, especially exploiting the Russophobia frames, it provides material for understanding the roßots of Russian trolling in general and helps to absorb rich material of other chapters.

This book as a whole demonstrates the complexity of the dangers caused by disruptive forces online. It is very difficult to prove that an anonymous person online has malicious intents even when the profile of the activity directly displays trolling patterns. Justification of Russian trolling, refusal to believe in their existence, denial of being affected by their activities is displayed by ordinary members of public and by trolls themselves. The technique of engaging the first ones in the amplification and spread of desired messages is managed by the latter ones efficiently. In addition, the propaganda techniques are carefully crafted over time and over many platforms to produce the overall effect rather than only to cause problems on one channel.

The author shows the necessity to call out Russian trolling as one of the most effective measure of opposing their disruptive activities, however, it has its own dangers of increasing distrust. The most universal solution suggested for dealing with it is media and information literacy. I would not be the one to oppose such suggestion as all my previous research has proved how effective it is in many cases – fighting information overload (which is also one way of causing disruption in communication process), dealing with stress through seeking relevant information, helping in making all kinds of choices, saving time and effort and what not. On the other hand, the examples of the user comments provided in the book, live quotations from the discussions proving the author's points empirically are very interesting to read. Readers of the book may recognize some types of messages and language as already seen in various discussion forums. The question is: are they posted by trolls or gullible members of public? If the latter, how willing they could be to increase their media literacy level? They may be also be very information literate and very aware of what they are doing, but seeking their own benefits, such as attention or safety. I would advocate for more complex measures bringing together the attempts of different actors interested in keeping public spaces public, not "post-public."

On the whole, the style and language of the book is academic, so it is directed at researchers and students of communication, though a very wide range of those studying political, online, virtual communication, propaganda and marketing, public relations, international and intercultural communication and more.

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February, 2024