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Dear Dr Floridi,

As I told you earlier today, we're doing a story on propaganda (and disinformation) on the Internet.

[...]

- The importance of the Internet as a propaganda tool.

Increasing, for several reasons. The world of information (something I've defined infosphere in my research studies)

1) has grown enough to include more and more gullible users, who accept whatever they are told or wish to believe

2) the growth has also meant that the Internet is no longer a single community but a galaxy of information planets, and since each user can choose which one to inhabit, personal disinformation becomes easier (imagine I believe pigs can fly and I subscribe only to news providers favourable to strict air regulations for flying pigs)

2) contains so much information AND disinformation to confuse even those who wish to double-check their sources

3) in many countries the web is becoming less and less a free space-for-all. China is a good example where access is heavily regulated.

- When was the Internet first used for propaganda (which war)?

Nazi Germany was the first to use war propaganda as we understand it today. Before, the Latin word meant "dissemination" and did not have the same negative connotation.

- When was the big (if yet) breakthrough for the Net as a propaganda instrument? If it didn't happen why not and when will it happen?

It is difficult to say, since the best propaganda is "transparent" i.e. one does not realize it is indeed propaganda, at least for a long time. My guess is that the Gulf War saw many attempts at using the Net for propaganda purposes.

As with the present context (war on terrorism), it would be interesting to access contents that are made available on the web only on the other side of firewalls and other similar limitations.

If anyone is reading web news in Afghanistan, can he (the she here is pointless) have access to the whole web, or just to certain domains?

- What are the differences compared with traditional media?

Interaction and globality. If one is really keen, it is possible to listen to different points of view virtually on anything, and be at least more cautious, if not better informed. In this sense, the Internet is a much less powerful tool for propaganda than the TV or even the newspapers.

- Is it easier or harder to use as a propaganda tool than traditional media?

I implicitly answered this question above. It is easier in terms of dissemination: anyone can set up a web service or a newsgroup and launch, or contribute to, a propaganda campaign. But it is harder to use successfully because of the interactive and global nature of the medium.

- Who benefits most from the Internet (for propaganda)?

Believable sources, as always. If a well-known institute, for example, decides to use its prestige to disseminate some propaganda news with authority, this is more likely to succeed. Mind that physical appearance counts as well. A bad design can make its contents less visible and credible. If one can spend a fortune, lies and propaganda will fly better.

- Who is the recipient of the propaganda - hardly people in Afghanistan?

The so-called educated public in the information society. Experts will know better (hopefully), and people on the wrong side of the digital divide (currently 93% of the earth population) will simply not know at all because they won't get the message anyway.

- Disinformation online? I've seen quite a few websites that claim to
- belong to "institutes". They look credible until you start examining them
- and discover they belong to certain interest groups. Are such sites more or
- less "dangerous" than "open" propaganda?

They are more dangerous because less identifiable.

This kind of propaganda very badly affects precisely that large portion of the population in the information society that relies on some recognisable authority. It is important to teach people to have a critical approach.

- How do you measure how "dangerous" they are?

If you mean in terms of level of efficiency, check for their links to other sources. The less they refer to other, independent sites or sources etc. the more dangerous they are. They wish to create a community of blind believers.

- Is penetration more important than intensity?

I'm not sure whether it is, but intensity is certainly more dangerous. In the end it can amount to brain-washing.

- Many people seem to believe that everything they read on websites is true.
- When will they realize that that's not the case?

Perhaps never. After all, most people seem to believe in astrology. However, education can help. And the truth will hit harder whenever the consequences of one's acritical acceptance of some propaganda turns out to be seriously damaging for one's welfare. After that, the person involved usually becomes more cautious. But only "usually".

- The role of jokes, hoaxes and "innocent" websites such as
- [www.newgrounds.com](http://www.newgrounds.com) where one can play games such as "Nuke Osama" etc.

We need to distinguish here. Hoaxes are a real problem. They consume an enormous quantity of people's time and generate a dangerous "wolf-crying" attitude (one stops checking real news about genuine viruses, for example). If you cry "fire" in a cinema and that's a "joke" the cost can be enormous and the fine very high. Something similar should apply to hoaxes and similarly irresponsible communication behaviours. Web sites are a different case since one opts to visit them.

- Do schools have a moral duty to educate about how to see what's
- propaganda and what's "unbiased information" (if there is such a thing)?

Of course, critical thinking is a key-issue the more the world shrinks into a single community. Unbiased information is probably unachievable, but there is a difference between trying one's best to be objective and having a hidden agenda.

➤ Suggested reading?

"Brave.Net.World: The Internet as a Disinformation Superhighway?"

The Electronic Library 14 (1996), pp. 509-514

It is available online at <http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/~floridi/pdf/bnw.pdf>