CHAPTER 11

Epistemic Violators: Disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe

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INTRODUCTION

The conditions of journalism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are currently challenged on multiple fronts. The democratisation of those countries, including their media systems, has been a complex and contradictory process (e.g., Bozoki, 2008; Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2015). The region is by no means a monolith. Still, many CEE countries show worrying signs in the form of the deterioration of democratic media: conditions in Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and Slovenia are cause for growing concern about media freedom in Europe (e.g., Baczynska, 2021).

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The capture of public media is one reason to worry (e.g., Dragomir & Aslama Horowitz, 2021; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). In many CEE countries, former state media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous, nor can they exercise their primary public function of informing people. Instead, they serve other vested interests (e.g., Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Schiffrin, 2017). In addition, in some cases, interest groups and powerful businesses have united forces to capture private media (Higgins, 2022). Another confounding factor is the rise of professional disinformation disguised as journalism. The result is that, instead of functioning as key providers and supporters of people's epistemic rights, many leading players in legacy journalism are deliberately promoting false content to their audiences. In a perversion of their original intent, laws against false information are used to silence critical voices in various CEE locales (e.g., Sandford, 2020).

This chapter begins with the premise that journalism can still function as a cornerstone of democratic societies and a primary guarantor of epistemic rights. Disinformation, defined here as deliberately composed and distributed falsehoods that pose as journalism, is a significant obstacle to the realisation of the right to information and knowledge. In the current media environment, it has become increasingly difficult for audiences to distinguish between real journalism and deliberate disinformation cloaked as journalism. Many bad actors engage in acts that can be called violations of epistemic rights, that is, hampering an individual's legal and moral rights to knowledge (e.g., Watson, 2021, 13–15). Such epistemic violations are particularly prominent in contexts in which there is not an enduring tradition of independent, trustworthy legacy media.

Another premise we adopt is that, to support epistemic rights via journalism, it is vital to understand the creators and distributors of disinformation in specific national and regional contexts. A fair amount of research on the typology of false information exists (e.g., Möller et al., n.d.; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), including research on the characteristics of so-called fake news (Celliers & Hattingh, 2020). Additionally, the perceptions, reception, and impacts of misinformation (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2021; Knuutila et al., 2022) and the impact of 'surveillance capitalism' on the viral spread of disinformation (Zuboff, 2019) have been focused on, including in case studies of various platforms and campaigns in various countries. Still, we know relatively little about the variety of actors involved in spreading disinformation. Such knowledge is urgently needed, especially in countries with political, geopolitical, and economic vulnerabilities.

Many CEE countries are fertile ground in this regard, allowing many kinds of purveyors of misinformation to co-exist and amplify related harms.

While disinformation can be distributed by individuals and in closed groups, the focus here is the systematic, organised, and professional misuse of journalism-like contexts and content. We identify and elaborate on three types of central disinformation disseminators: state media and captured public service media; commercial media, which are usually in the hands of oligarchs or other interest groups; and new platforms specifically established to spread conspiracy theories and similar unfounded claims.

In the following, we discuss the multidimensional role of journalism as the guardian of epistemic rights. We then outline the key features of these three types of disinformation actors and illustrate them using cases from CEE. For our empirical examples, we draw on two mapping projects created by the Centre for Media, Data and Society at Central European University (CMDC), namely the Media Influence Matrix (2017–ongoing), the Business of Misinformation (2019–2020) and the State of State Media (2021–ongoing), and argue for the need for such typologies in combatting violators of epistemic rights.

Focus: Epistemic Rights and Their Violation by Journalism

Traditionally, news and journalism have served a central function in democratic societies. As aptly outlined in the global Media for Democracy Monitor project (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021), several roles on the part of journalism support the core dimensions of democracy. In its monitorial role, journalism acts as a watchdog and holds the powers that be accountable. In its facilitative role, journalism supports citizenship and a deliberative democratic public sphere by promoting discussions and participation regarding common issues. The radical role of journalism refers to the understanding that journalism should resist any hegemonic truths and offer a diversity of views. Finally, journalism's collaborative role refers to its ability to help authorities by disseminating essential information in times of crisis.

These four roles foster three dimensions of journalism that are central to democracy: journalism that provides free and unbiased information that supports freedoms; journalism that mediates between different interests and promotes equality; and watchdog journalism that informs its

audiences about abuses of power (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). These journalistic functions are also crucial when assessed in the light of epistemic rights, here understood as the production, dissemination, and application of knowledge, information, understanding, and truth (see Hannu Nieminen's chapter in this volume). Journalistic content is an 'epistemic good' (Watson, 2021, 15) that, ideally, supports these rights.

The informational role of journalism is self-evidently linked to epistemic rights, as it enables access to knowledge. It is no wonder, then, that freedom of the press is widely understood as a human rights matter and codified in human rights instruments (Cruft, 2021). Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights addresses epistemic rights in a broad sense. The right pertains not only to freedom of expression but also to a person's right to seek, receive, and share information (Watson, 2021, 36). Thus, the monitorial, radical, and facilitative roles of journalism can be viewed as particularly central to epistemic rights in democratic societies: a democracy must keep everyone informed regarding the essentials during crises.

These functions and their democratic dimensions form an ideal ethos for journalism. No journalistic activity can perform them all or perform them all the time, but what happens if journalism-like content is used to violate epistemic rights deliberately? Violations of epistemic rights include the propagation of falsehoods, omissions, and the abuse of authority (Watson, 2021, 48–58). Unfortunately, the current global media ecosystem hosts organised and even institutionalised actors engaged in disinformation. They engage in a combination of these violations and not only spread false information but also intentionally omit dissenting views while using their authority as a formal media organisation or a news-like website to increase their impact.

Context: CEE, Media Capture, and Epistemic Erosion

Institutionalised disseminators of disinformation in many CEE countries are a symptom of a specific trend regarding national media structures. The phenomenon that best describes these structural problems is media capture. Captured media environments are characterised by the domination of the media sphere by political interest groups and influential businesses (Schiffrin, 2017). Not only do these forces control media regulators, public media institutions, and mechanisms for the disbursement of state funds to the media, but they also gain substantial control of the private media

sector by buying media outlets through various businesses that are, in many cases, oligarchic structures. One consequence of media capture is that these groups achieve control of the editorial narrative on public media through their influence over the internal decision-making process, which leads to undue influence on the work of journalists. If this goal is unachievable, public media face waves of purges of critical journalists, and these outlets ultimately become state propaganda channels.

The first instances of media capture, particularly the growing role of the government in the media market, could be observed in CEE in the late 2000s. The CEE region consists of a group of countries that largely share a common historical legacy anchored in a common communist past that was dominated for decades, until 1990, by the influence of the now-defunct Soviet Union. Most of these nations struggled with similar challenges during their transition to democracy in the 1990s, including convoluted processes of development for regulatory institutions, reforms of centralised state economies into free market economies, the institutionalisation of free electoral processes, and the creation of free media systems that would allow for private ownership and ensure the independence of public media. Although most of these countries faced common threats and risks during the democratisation process, they differed in some respects. For example, countries in the Visegrad group[1] experienced fast economic growth due to their early efforts to privatise their industries and rapid integration into pan-European structures. With endemic corruption and a strong presence on the part of former communist elites in their governments and economies, Bulgaria and Romania have lagged economically, a factor that delayed their democratisation efforts. In the Balkans, the wars that erupted in the 1990s had a devastating effect on the development of these nations, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, delaying their integration into EU political structures and affecting their democratisation.

The region began to experience undue influence on the part of government bodies and businesses for two main reasons. The first was the economic crisis, which battered advertising markets across the region and triggered massive declines in media income; this deepened an already painful crisis for many independent media outlets. The other was the unprecedented speed of technological development, which paved the way for a handful of tech platforms to amass unprecedented market power,

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[1] Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Poland.

including ad spending. In such a context, many media outlets in the region became easy prey for powerful governments and oligarchs, who began to purchase them (Dragomir, 2018). As a part of this process, hordes of foreign investors, many of whom had a history of operation in CEE since the early 1990s, left these markets (Dragomir, 2019).

While a captured media environment does not automatically mean that captured outlets will disseminate disinformation, in practice, it contributes to the erosion of epistemic rights, often in more ways than one. At the minimum, the rationale behind capture is often one of not only market-driven ownership concentration but also the control of messaging and the crowding out of independent, diverse voices and opinions. This alone is an epistemic violation (Watson, 2021). Moreover, a captured context is fertile ground for players who purposely seek to promote false information and misuse their authority. Unfortunately, the CEE countries offer several examples of different types of epistemic violators.

ACTORS: TYPOLOGY OF VIOLATORS OF EPISTEMIC RIGHTS

The rapid spread of disinformation has intensified in the past decade due to the glut of opportunities to communicate and share content that emerged with the rise of digital platforms and social networks. Recent comparative analyses of disinformation actors[2] have helped to identify three main categories: state or captured public media, captured private media, and journalism-like outlets of disinformation.

Gauging the overall impact of each type of violator and understanding which is the most damaging to media freedom are problematic, as each violator must be analysed within the local context. Some causalities and correlations, however, can be detected. In countries where the government tightly controls the public media, such as Hungary and Poland, the impact of captured commercial media outlets used to churn out propagandistic content favouring the authorities is much higher than in places where public media institutions maintain their editorial autonomy, such as the Czech Republic. In many CEE countries, novel online portals that mostly exist to peddle disinformation appear less frequently than in other parts of the world, for example, Western Europe or the US, because the

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[2] For the Media Influence Matrix, see: https://cmds.ceu.edu/media-influence-matrix-whats-it-all-about. For the Business of Misinformation project, see: https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation.

propaganda market in the region is already filled by mainstream media. Such disinformation websites, unless they have links with large media outlets, are at a significant disadvantage when competing with lavishly financed mainstream outlets, especially public media that draw on government funds.

Generally, outlets in all three categories have equally damaging effects on epistemic rights. State-controlled and privately owned media typically command large audiences, thanks to their significant outreach, access to capital and solid infrastructure. Alternative news sources may not always have the reach of mainstream media; however, they are popular among audiences who either look for alternative sources of information or simply do not question the source of the information they receive.

State-Controlled and Captured Public Media

With a few exceptions, across CEE, public service media are a major channel for disinformation, propaganda, and biased content. Most of them, in fact, never managed to shed the legacy of state-controlled media from before 1989, when they were operated as propaganda channels in the service of the authoritarian communist regimes that ruled the region.

According to the State of State Media study of 2022 (Dragomir & Söderström, 2022), of the 31 state-administered broadcasters, news agencies, and portals in CEE,[3] only one-third are editorially independent. In some places, state-administered news agencies, such as the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA), Czech News Agency (CTK), and the News Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR), enjoy more editorial freedom than in other countries in the region, such as Slovenia or Croatia, arguably because they exert less of an influence on audiences than broadcast outlets do. Thus, they are considered less significant by the government.

The impact of government control on public media is most visible in the content of these media outlets, which has a strong political and pro-government bias; this is the main problem public service broadcasting has in the region (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). In Poland, for example, a series of legal changes adopted in 2015 and 2016 cemented government

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[3] The CEE region in the cited study includes 17 countries, as follows: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

control of the public broadcaster TVP.[4] Most independent journalists were fired shortly after the 2015 legal amendments were adopted (Klimkiewicz, 2016). The broadcaster instead hired journalists supportive of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), the right-wing populist party then in power in Poland. As a result, the news coverage on TVP has changed, becoming more in favour of the government; the Law and Justice Party has argued that all prior governments exploited public media as well (Tilles, 2020).

For instance, in Serbia, as its management board is staffed with government loyalists (Meadow, 2022), the public broadcaster RTS is constantly under pressure from party officials to produce content that blatantly favours the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which has been in power since 2012.[5] Finally, Hungary is the most prominent case of a government-controlled public media system. After winning an election in 2010, the right-wing nationalist party Fidesz, which has since ruled without interruption, adopted a law that merged all public media into a new institution, the Media Services and Support Trust Fund (MTVA). The Hungarian News Agency (MTI) was given the 'exclusive right' to produce content for Hungarian radio and television broadcasters.[6] During the past decade, evidence of editorial pressures on MTVA has abounded. Bans on topics considered controversial by the government, such as human rights, and government officials feeding 'lists of sensitive topics' to editors, along with instructions regarding how to cover them, have both become normal (Bayer, 2020).

Politicisation has had negative consequences for the audience share of many public service media in the region. Most have experienced massive declines in audience figures since 1990, largely due to the liberalisation of the broadcast market, which allowed commercially run broadcast companies to establish operations. Despite this decline, public media still play an important role in the lives of their audiences. In most parts of the region, they are the only broadcasters that provide full coverage of the national territory. Moreover, they are often perceived as trusted sources of

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[4] See Telewizja Polska (TVP) in the State Media Monitor at https://statemediamonitor. com/2022/06/telewizja-polska-tvp/.

[5] See Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) in the State Media Monitor at https://statemedia-monitor.com/2022/05/radio-television-of-serbia-rts/.

[6] See MTVA in the State Media Monitor at https://statemediamonitor. com/2022/06/mtva/.

information and achieve significant viewership during the exclusive events and programmes they have the right to air.

PRIVATELY OWNED, OLIGARCH-CONTROLLED MEDIA

Many privately owned media across CEE are also responsible for spreading disinformation. Most of these actors are commercially funded through advertising, but many do not achieve profitability. Their losses are usually covered through revenues from state advertising, a form of funding used extensively by governments in the region to control private media outlets. Hungary is one example of a country where public resources are used for this purpose. Before 2010, when the Socialist Party was in power, the distribution of state ad spending was more-or-less balanced. However, in 2010, when Fidesz won elections, state ad funding was blatantly shifted toward media outlets that were supportive of Fidesz. Most of the beneficiaries were the businessmen who owned these media outlets and were known for their pro-Fidesz stance (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020).

All in all, the control of private media by loyalist businesses has dramatically increased in the region during the past decade. The countries that have experienced this most acutely are Hungary, Serbia, and Poland. In Hungary, hundreds of such outlets are in the hands of government-friendly oligarchs. Fidesz, to centralise its control over these outlets, established a foundation named KESMA in 2018, to which oligarchs close to Prime Minister Orban donated all media outlets acquired over the previous five years. An Orban loyalist was appointed to head the foundation, which shelters over 470 media entities.[7] In recent years, the danger of oligarchic control has also been felt in the form of censorship and self-censorship in other CEE countries, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

With public media under tight governmental control, the editorial coverage of captured privately owned media changed immediately after their ownership was transferred to suit the interests of the state and associated interest groups. The impact of commercially run media captured by businesses close to the government is considered significant, as many of these outlets are part of the mainstream media, including television and radio

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[7] See KESMA in the State Media Monitor at https://statemediamonitor.com/2022/06/kesma/.

channels, print media with nationwide or regional coverage, and popular online portals.

OTHER SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION

The presence of newly established domestic disinformation websites is smaller in CEE than in other parts of the world, although the region is highly exposed to disinformation, especially political propaganda emanating from Russia, for which the region has key strategic importance (Kréko, 2020). News outlets financed by the Russian government, such as Sputnik News, have expanded across the CEE region and opened local-language portals in several CEE countries. Many other pro-Russian websites have appeared in the region, all disguised as independent sources of information. For example, the website RuBaltic.Ru, established in 2013, claims to be run by a group of 'scientists from Kaliningrad and Moscow'. The portal is visibly a pro-Kremlin site that attacks Russia's enemies while praising the political leadership in the Kremlin.[8] However, locally grown disinformation portals are less prominent in CEE than elsewhere. Again, this may be partially due to widespread government control over the vast majority of the mainstream media. For example, in Serbia, 'small websites cannot compete with "misinformation giants" like the tabloid newspaper Blic' (Szakacs, 2020).

Foreign governments interested in spreading propaganda sometimes channel their efforts into support for political parties and NGO diplomacy (Kréko, 2020), as friendly politicians already control mainstream media in the CEE region. After Russia launched its war on Ukraine in February 2022, state-controlled media in Hungary engaged in a massive pro-Russia propaganda campaign sanctioned by the Hungarian government, which has economic and intelligence-related interests in Russia (Makszimov, 2022). Similarly, most of the media outlets in Serbia promote Russia as a protector of Serbian interests (Kisic, 2022).

With such large players dominating the disinformation provision in the region, local disinformation websites focus on topics that generate revenue. In Hungary, for example, although various websites focus on content inspired by conspiracy theories and do not seek monetisation, there is a large group of similar websites for which the main goal is to make money,

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[8] Since 2020, CMDS has been running a project aimed at collecting data about these groups.

and these choose only content that attracts an audience (Szakacs, 2019). Advertising appears to be the principal source of revenue for most of the disinformation websites that were identified by the Business of Misinformation project.[9] Some of these portals are so popular with advertisers that they are sometimes difficult to navigate due to an 'overabundance of ads' (Szakacs, 2020).

The damaging impact of alternative, homegrown disinformation platforms has been recognised by various actors, including NGOs and private businesses. Thus far, the initial reactions against them have come from the private sector. Some businesses have avoided placing ads on such websites out of fear that an association with these platforms would hurt them financially. However, due to their reach and proliferation, these platforms have a disproportionately negative impact on the infosphere, chiefly because they feed into the extreme polarisation confronting societies in CEE.

Conclusion

An overview of the key actors disseminating disinformation in CEE (see Table 11.1) shows that violations of epistemic rights are often homegrown. In CEE countries, domestic legacy organisations and journalism-like websites effectively dismantle the role of journalism as a trustworthy source of information while simultaneously reaching wide audiences.

Central and Eastern Europe, as a region, is not a special case. Indeed, independent journalism is in trouble globally. Various rankings indicate that freedom of the press declined in the late 2010s and early 2020s (e.g., RSF, 2022). Similarly, each year has seen the online and offline safety of journalists threatened more openly and viciously than the year before (e.g., CPJ, n.d.). The global study of state media (Dragomir & Söderström, 2021, 2022) documents that independent media are vanishing worldwide. COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, two local-global crises, have fundamentally challenged media systems with 'infodemics' and war-related propaganda.

In this precarious situation, violations can cause a variety of epistemic harms (Watson, 2021). They can result in epistemic injuries by disadvantaging those whose rights have been violated via either the communication of incorrect health information or hateful content regarding one's

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[9] See more at The Business of Misinformation at https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation.

Table 11.1 Summary of the types of violators of epistemic rights

Type of violator	Actors	Forms of violations	In CEE countries
State/public media	Governments	Public funding guarantees the control by the ruling party and allows dissemination of dominant political interests	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia
Commercial media	Oligarchs with governments or other political actors	Ruling party and dominant political interests are promoted; state advertising functions as a form of control	Hungary, Poland, Serbia
Journalism-like entities	Foreign interference	Non-national actors support friendly politics	Czech Republic, Hungary, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia

ethnicity. These harms often lead to dysfunction within the epistemic system or, as Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) have posited, a societal information disorder. Even if violations do not disadvantage a specific person or group, disinformation is still an epistemic insult, a violation of rights. Epistemic offenses have a ripple effect and cause secondary harms, such as a loss of trust in a source; knowledge institutions or, in the worst case, societal institutions and structures (Watson, 2021, 71–79). Diminishing societal and institutional trust has been one of the major concerns in public and academic debates worldwide (e.g., Edelman, 2022; Newman et al., 2022).

Following Watson (2021, 91), we must understand these developments from the perspective of epistemic rights so that we can identify harms that have gone unnoticed or not been taken seriously before, including the significant disseminators of disinformation that seek to benefit from violating epistemic rights. We need to know more about each country's and region's good and bad actors–promoters and violators of epistemic rights–and their methods. This is not a unique problem, as has been demonstrated by the case of epistemic rights the UK and Brexit (Watson, 2018). Still, typologies like the one discussed in this chapter point to regional similarities and may assist in analysing other countries. Only with empirical

knowledge can we effectively tackle violations and support media systems. After all, independent, robust, and diverse national media systems are among the best remedies for the effects of disinformation.

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