

German government plans propaganda agency in response to “fake news”

Marianne Arens, Peter Schwarz
9 January 2017

For weeks, the German and international public sphere has been bombarded with a campaign against so-called “fake news.”

If one believes leading politicians and journalists, then the cause of the loss of trust in establishment parties and the media are false reports on social networks and their manipulation by the Russian intelligence agencies. As *Der Spiegel* reported, referring to an internal paper of the Federal Interior Ministry, the government now wants to establish a “Defence Centre against Misinformation”—a type of censorship and propaganda agency.

The “Defence Centre” will be set up in the Federal Press Office under Steffen Seibert, who, six years ago, moved seamlessly from his position leading the “Heute Journal,” one of the most important news programs in Germany, to his position as a government spokesperson. The new centre is supposed to strengthen the “political power of defence” of the population and force social networks such as Facebook, Google and Twitter to censor content posted by users.

“The acceptance of a post-factual age would amount to political capitulation,” an internal paper quoted by *Der Spiegel* said. The paper insisted that “authentic political communication” remains “crucial for the 21st century” as well. Accordingly, wide-reaching measures would have to be formulated to deal with the disinformation campaign, fake news and the manipulation of public opinion.

Numerous politicians support the campaign against supposed fake news on the Internet and demand stronger laws.

Parliamentary President Norbert Lammert (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) told the *Osnabrücker Newspaper* about “dangers of intentional manipulation by individuals with missionary-like ambition” that are bound up with digital media. He claimed that there was “a need for readjustment by lawmakers and legislation regarding the increasing lapses in social media.” According to Lammert, it has “terrible consequences” when insults, defamation and threats remain unpunished on the Internet.

The faction leaders of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) in federal parliament, Thomas Oppermann and Volker Kauder, want to force social networks to engage in strict self-censorship. A new law is aimed at making Facebook and Twitter responsible for creating a legal protection zone in Germany, which will be active around the clock and demand that fake news entries be deleted within 24 hours. Otherwise, they will be threatened with fines of up to a half a million euros.

As CDU/CSU faction leader Kauder emphasized, the SPD and the CDU agree there should be such a law and want it to be enacted at the beginning of this year. There are reports that Kauder is also considering harsher punishments for insults on the Internet because of the large audience they are able to find there.

Jean-Claude Juncker, head of the EU Commission, and Martin Schulz (SPD), president of the European Parliament, have spoken on the issue and called on companies such as Facebook and Google to “take consistent action against false reports on the Internet.”

In reality the plans for an Orwellian Truth Ministry have nothing to do with concerns about false news reports. Instead, the established parties, the state media and private media corporations fear that they are losing their monopoly on public opinion. The Internet has provided millions of people with the possibility, for the first time, of obtaining access to information that has not been selected and filtered by the official media. This has been behind the fear in the media and political parties.

A recent edition of *Der Spiegel* expresses itself quite bluntly and openly. In the text of the lead article, headlined “The Great Erosion,” the author anxiously asks, “Can it be that a revolution is imminent?”

The article then discusses the growing mistrust of the population in the government, parties and the media. In Germany today, there are growing numbers of people “who believe that the government and/or other powers are pursuing all kinds of secret plans.” Many citizens believe that the media “always produce their reports and commentaries on the basis of orders that come from somewhere ‘at the very top.’”

“It all has something of a pre-revolutionary mood,” the multi-page article concluded. At the moment, the parties are “the biggest losers at this time, because the political class becomes frightened and anxious, whenever the ‘voice of the people’ is heard. Many people, in some places a critical mass, are no longer correctly reached by the system, which has led to a loss in the legitimacy of the system.”

This is the real reason for the call for censorship—rather than the supposed existence of “fake news.” The ruling class is reacting to growing social tensions and political discontent in the same way it has in the past: with police, prosecution and the suppression of free speech.

Schools in Germany continue to be named after Carl von Ossietzky. However, it has for the most part forgotten that

Ossietzky sat in prison in the Weimar Republic and died at the hands of the Nazis because he wrote about the illegal arms deals of the Reichswehr in the *Weltbühne*. If there were still a *Weltbühne* today, it would without a doubt be placed right at the top of the official list of fake news sources.

Of course there are false and falsified reports that circulate on the Internet and are used by right-wing and racist movements. However, when it comes to the fabrication of fake news aimed at stirring up support for militarism and hatred for foreigners, social media cannot hold a candle to the government and major media sources. The population's mistrust in the media, against which *Der Spiegel*, Lammert, Oppermann and others are clamouring, is the result of decades of experience.

It is not an accident that this mistrust is especially strong in the eastern part of the country. One need only recall the promise of "blooming landscapes," which accompanied the 1990 dissolution of East Germany. Instead, there was industrial decline, unemployment, low-wage jobs and social ruin. Nevertheless, the media never tired of speaking of an alleged "upswing" in the east.

Or consider the accounts about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that were spread not only by the US media, but also by the German media in 2003 to justify the military conquest of an almost defenceless country. Since then it has become clear that these reports were based on falsifications and lies. Only someone who considers the majority of the population completely stupid can imagine that this has escaped people's notice or suppose that they have not reached any conclusions as a consequence.

During the Ukraine crisis three years ago, the production of fake news by the official German media took on new dimensions. Although the participation of right-wing and fascist militias in the putsch organized by the West against pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich was obvious, all the major media outlets wrote about a "democratic revolution." Even the programme committee of ARD had to acknowledge at the time that the reporting on Ukraine had "given the impression of bias" and appeared to be directed against "Russia and Russian standpoints."

This has not escaped the notice of millions of people either, especially after it became clear that the newly installed President Petro Poroshenko, who received the blessing of Berlin and Washington, is just as corrupt and antisocial as his predecessor.

The German media itself never corresponded with this picture of independence and objective reporting that it is eagerly demanding of others.

In the public media, the only ones who rise are those who have the right party credentials or do not go beyond certain narrow confines in their criticism. Franz Alt, the moderator of the ARD magazine "Report," was one of those who discovered this the hard way. When, on the basis of his Christian faith, the CDU member criticized the build-up of the federal army, he was banned—before a running camera—from appearing on television. "Due to the engaged statement by Franz Alt on behalf of the peace movement and against the NATO double decision the independence determined by statute cannot be maintained at this time," was the argument used by the editor of the Southwest Radio Station to explain Alt's expulsion.

Since then, the situation has not improved. For the past 22 years

the Bavarian Radio Station has been led in a similar manner by Sigmund Gottlieb, who might as well be a press spokesperson for the CDU. Public scandals such as the incident with Alt are rare, since most journalists have internalized the methods of censorship.

With regard to the private media, it is the millionaire owners who determine political line. If there were a prize for fake news, Springer house would no doubt be the most deserving. For decades, the highly paid journalists of this tabloid newspaper have produced articles aimed at lowering the cultural and political level of the masses. At the press ball of the Springer Publishing House, all the Berlin notables gather together each year. Its top shareholder, Friede Springer, is a close friend of Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel's husband, Joachim Sauer, sits on the board of trustees of the Friede Springer Foundation and receives €10,000 per year in compensation, according to *Der Spiegel*.

The so-called "serious" newspapers such as *Die Zeit*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also feature propaganda written by the likes of Stefan Kornelius, Jochen Bittner and Josef Joffe, who have close connections with political think tanks, the government and the military and lobby for their aims. For instance, Jochen Bittner wrote about the strategy paper, "New power, new responsibility," that prepared the revival of German militarism, without informing the reader that he also took part in the preparation of this document.

The false representations of the events in Ukraine were also accompanied at that time with a campaign against fake news and preparations for war against Russia. The claim that Russian hacker attacks are responsible for the election victory of Donald Trump in the US and the rise of right-wing parties in Europe was a common thread throughout the various media accounts, although there was no evidence for this at all. The *Tagesschau* reported on December 26: "Above all in Germany, parties are currently seeking the possibility of combatting manipulation of opinion on the Internet. They are concerned that Russia could intervene in the federal election in this way [like in the US]."

There is also deep mistrust of this propaganda in the population—not out of sympathy for Russian President Vladimir Putin, but because many people know or sense that the war preparations serve imperialist interests and that they could be among the first victims of a military confrontation with Russia.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact