



KFG Working Paper Series • No. 18 • August 2018

---

Björnstjern Baade

**Fake News and International Law**

Berlin Potsdam Research Group „The International Rule of Law – Rise or Decline?“

## KFG Working Paper Series

Edited by Heike Krieger, Georg Nolte and Andreas Zimmermann

All KFG Working Papers are available on the KFG website at [www.kfg-intlaw.de](http://www.kfg-intlaw.de).

Copyright remains with the authors.

Baade, Björnstjern, Fake News and International Law, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 18, Berlin  
Potsdam Research Group “The International Rule of Law – Rise or Decline?”, Berlin, August 2018.

ISSN 2509-3770 (Internet)

This publication has been funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG)

Product of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Commercial use is not permitted



Berlin Potsdam Research Group  
International Law – Rise or Decline?

Unter den Linden 9  
10099 Berlin, Germany

[info@kfg-intlaw.de](mailto:info@kfg-intlaw.de)  
+49 (0)30 2093-3322  
[www.kfg-intlaw.de](http://www.kfg-intlaw.de)

**DFG** Deutsche  
Forschungsgemeinschaft

Online available at: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus4-422383>

## Fake News and International Law

Björnstjern Baade<sup>1</sup>

*This article is accepted for publication in: European Journal of International Law, forthcoming.*

### **Abstract:**

*In light of current efforts at addressing the dangers of fake news, this article will revisit the international law relevant to the phenomenon, in particular the prohibition of intervention, the 1936 International Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace, and the 1953 Convention on the International Right of Correction. It will be argued that important lessons can be learned from the League of Nations' (LON) efforts in the interwar period and the UN's activities in the immediate post-WWII era, while taking into account the new challenges that arise from modern communication technology.*

*Taking up the LON's and UN's distinction between false and distorted news, the international legal framework will be tested, in particular, against the coverage of the 2016 'Lisa case' by Russian Government-funded media. This coverage is widely considered to be fake news aimed at destabilizing Germany's society and institutions.*

*The article argues that false news can be subject to repressive regulation in a sensible manner. Distorted news, however, will have to be tolerated legally, since prohibitions in this regard would be too prone to abuse. A free and pluralist media, complemented by an appropriate governmental information policy, remains the best answer to fake news in all its forms. Due diligence obligations to fact-check, transparency, and remedies that are effective despite difficulties in attribution, and despite a lack of universal acceptance, could likewise be conducive.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior research fellow at Freie Universität Berlin.

**Contents:**

- 1. Introduction .....5
- 2. The Concept of Fake News .....5
  - a) Fake News in a Strict and in a Wider Sense (False and Distorted News).....6
  - b) RT, Sputnik, and the 2016 ‘Lisa case’ .....6
  - c) Attributing Fake News.....8
- 3. The Legality of Fake News .....9
  - a) Fake News as Intervention .....9
  - b) The 1936 International Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace..... 11
    - aa) Its Content and History ..... 11
    - bb) Applicability to New Communication Technology.....14
    - cc) Applicability to Modern Fake News.....14
- 4. Remedies Against Fake News ..... 15
  - a) Right to Correction .....15
  - b) Right to Reply.....15
  - c) Counter-Propaganda .....16
- 5. The Lessons Learned and Contemporary Challenges for Countering Fake News.....16
  - a) The Complexities of the Information Age ..... 17
  - b) The Limits of Legal Regulation .....18
- 6. Concluding Observations ..... 20
- The Author .....22

## 1. Introduction

In 2013, the false report that the President had been injured in an attack on the White House sent the Dow Jones on a \$136 billion dive.<sup>2</sup> The false allegation that Hillary Clinton was operating a child-trafficking ring from the basement of a Washington pizzeria prompted a man to investigate with an assault rifle,<sup>3</sup> and may have influenced the 2016 US election.<sup>4</sup> Fake news is widely considered a substantial security threat, in particular if it is state-sponsored.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, various actors are now contemplating how to counter it.<sup>6</sup>

This article will examine the concept (2.) and legality (3.) of fake news, and it will explore possible remedies (4.), in particular against the backdrop of fake news said to be employed by the Russian Government. Finally, the lessons learned will be drawn (5.).

## 2. The Concept of Fake News

According to a common definition,<sup>7</sup> fake news items are lies, i.e. deliberately false factual statements, distributed via news channels. But current usage is not yet settled and there are clearly different types of fake news that should not be confounded for legal purposes.<sup>8</sup> This article will use ‘fake news’ as an umbrella term and take up the differentiation between false, and distorted (or tendentious) news used by the League of Nations (LON) as well as the UN.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, ‘Syrian hackers claim AP hack that tipped stock market by \$136 billion. Is it terrorism?’, *The Washington Post* (23 April 2013), available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/04/23/syrian-hackers-claim-ap-hack-that-tipped-stock-market-by-136-billion-is-it-terrorism/?utm\\_term=.a9adecac21bc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/04/23/syrian-hackers-claim-ap-hack-that-tipped-stock-market-by-136-billion-is-it-terrorism/?utm_term=.a9adecac21bc). All links last visited 8 June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C.’, *The Washington Post* (6 December 2016), available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html).

<sup>4</sup> In a December 2016 poll, 14% of Trump supporters believed Pizzagate to be true, 32% were not sure: ‘Trump Remains Unpopular; Voters Prefer Obama on SCOTUS Pick’, *Public Policy Polling* (9 December 2016), available at <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2016/12/trump-remains-unpopular-voters-prefer-obama-on-scotus-pick.html>.

<sup>5</sup> O’Malley and Levin, ‘How to Counter Fake News’, *Foreign Affairs* (5 January 2017), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2017-01-05/how-counter-fake-news>.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. European Commission, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation (2018); UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and ‘Fake News’, Disinformation and Propaganda, FOM.GAL/3/17, No. 2c.

<sup>7</sup> See for an overview: M. Verstraete et al., *Identifying and Countering Fake News*, Arizona Legal Studies Discussion Paper No. 17-15 (2017), at 5-9.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Graves, *Deciding What’s True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism* (2016), at 145 et seq.

<sup>9</sup> S. P. López, Freedom of Information, UN ECOSOC O.R. 16<sup>th</sup> Sess. Suppl. No. 12, 6 May 1953, UN Doc. E/2426, at 6, 53; UN (ed.), *Freedom of Information*, Vol. I (1950), at 204 et seq.; GA Res. 534 (VII), 16 December 1952; LON and Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle (eds.), *La Radiodiffusion et la Paix* (1933), at 75-76, 140; ‘Memorandum from the Polish Government Concerning the Attainment of Moral Disarmament’, LON, C.602.M.240.1931.IX, 23 September 1931, at 3; see also *infra* the preamble of the Correction Convention.

### a) Fake News in a Strict and in a Wider Sense (False and Distorted News)

News items that are intentionally fabricated are, of course, fake news in the strict sense (false news), regardless of their author's ultimate intention. But the use of information to influence people's beliefs and behaviour can be much more subtle. Accurate information can be framed and presented in such a way as to make its recipients likely to draw certain (false) conclusions.<sup>10</sup> This is fake news in a wider sense (distorted news). Such reporting caters to the audience's preconceptions, and reinforces them.<sup>11</sup> If firmly established, these preconceptions make it possible to predict the (false) conclusions an audience may draw from a certain presentation of true facts.<sup>12</sup> Consider, e.g., a news outlet that reports exclusively on crimes committed by foreigners.

This concept of fake news will be tested, in particular, against the coverage of the 2016 'Lisa case' by the Russian government-funded news channel RT (formerly Russia Today) and the news agency Sputnik,<sup>13</sup> which have been continually accused of producing fake news to destabilize Western societies by sowing doubt about the integrity and functionality of Western institutions. The US intelligence services, the European Parliament and the French President share this assessment with various scholars.<sup>14</sup>

### b) RT, Sputnik, and the 2016 'Lisa case'

In January 2016, 13-year old Russo-German Lisa disappeared in Berlin for about 30 hours. The Russian public TV channel 'Channel One' (Первый канал, also *Pervij kanal*) was the first to report that, according to her aunt, Lisa had been abducted and raped by foreigners.<sup>15</sup> The same news was relayed by German-language Sputnik.<sup>16</sup> Both outlets reported that, according to Lisa's relatives, German police refused to investigate the matter.<sup>17</sup> Later, Sputnik accurately reported the official police statement declaring that there had been no abduction or rape.<sup>18</sup> It also reported on the prosecution's statement that it had begun an investigation into the sexual abuse of Lisa as a minor

<sup>10</sup> Rogers and Tyushka, "'Hacking into the West": Russia's "Anti-Hegemonic" Drive and the Strategic Narrative Offensive', 2 *Defence Strategic Communications* (2017) 35, at 45; cf. Timothy, 'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', 17 *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (2004) 237; Borchers, "'Do You Really Think Russia Should Pay Up for That?'"', 18:4 *Javnost – The Public* (2011) 89, at 98 et seq.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', in H. Arendt (ed.), *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1961) 227, at 251-252.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. F.S. Hansen, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: A study of disinformation* (2017), at 28.

<sup>13</sup> J. Sarts, The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany's 2017 Elections, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 28 June 2017, at 2, available at <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sfr-jsarts-062817b.pdf>; S. Spahn, *Das Ukraine-Bild in Deutschland: Die Rolle der russischen Medien* (2016), at 109.

<sup>14</sup> National Intelligence Council, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*, ICA 2017-01D (6 January 2017), at 3-4; European Parliament, Resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties, 2016/2030(INI), at 1, 7-8; de Boni, 'Devant Poutine, Macron dénonce la «propagande» de médias prorusses', *Le Figaro* (29 May 2017), available at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2017/05/29/01002-20170529ARTFIG00274-devant-poutine-macron-denonce-la-propagande-des-medias-pro-russes.php>; Spahn, *ibid.*, at 17.

<sup>15</sup> Австрия временно приостанавливает действие Шенгенского соглашения из-за случаев насилия в Германии, Первый канал (16 January 2016), available at [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2016-01-16/3330-avstriya-vremenno\\_priostanavlivaet\\_deystvie\\_shengenskogo\\_soglasheniya\\_iz\\_za\\_sluchaev\\_nasiliya\\_v\\_germanii](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2016-01-16/3330-avstriya-vremenno_priostanavlivaet_deystvie_shengenskogo_soglasheniya_iz_za_sluchaev_nasiliya_v_germanii).

<sup>16</sup> 'Berlin Minderjährige vergewaltigt, Polizei tatenlos.', *Sputnik* (17 January 2016), available at <https://de.sputniknews.com/gesellschaft/20160117307158514-berlin-minderjaehrige-vergewaltigt-polizei-tatenlos/>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> 'Polizei dementiert: Keine Entführung von Mädchen durch Migranten in Berlin', *Sputnik* (18 January 2016), available at <https://de.sputniknews.com/panorama/20160118307180927-polizei-dementiert-entfuehrung/>.

– i.e. for voluntary but legally-speaking non-consensual sexual relations with an older man – which took place *before* the girl's disappearance.<sup>19</sup>

While reporting all the facts, Sputnik framed the issue as showing that security problems had increased in German cities since the refugee crisis of 2015. During his annual press conference that coincided with the investigation, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made the same connection and mentioned

... the situation when a Russian girl's disappearance in Germany was hushed up for a long time for some reason. Now, at least, we are communicating with her lawyer, who is working with her family and with the Russian Embassy. It is clear that Lisa did not exactly decide voluntarily to disappear for 30 hours. Truth and justice must prevail here.<sup>20</sup>

RT interviewed the family's lawyer who commented on the prosecutor's statement, confounding the (unfounded) allegation of a recent abduction and rape, and the sexual abuse that the prosecutor believed to have taken place earlier.<sup>21</sup> In 2017, RT correctly reported that a man had been indicted for sexually abusing Lisa as a minor – and called out 'mainstream media' for having accused Lisa of lying and for traumatizing her by using her case as a campaign against RT.<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of this coverage, over 700 people with a Russian background had demonstrated in front of the Chancellery in Berlin, even more in other cities.<sup>23</sup> German Foreign Minister Steinmeier rejected allegations of misconduct of German authorities as 'political propaganda' at the time but stopped short of calling them an intervention in the internal affairs of Germany.<sup>24</sup> The police, initially, had not released any more details in order to respect the girl's and her family's privacy rights.<sup>25</sup> Only later, details concerning the GPS tracking of the girl's mobile phone were announced which showed that she had spent the time in which she had disappeared at a friend's place.<sup>26</sup>

The incident's coverage by RT and Sputnik is not fake news in the strict sense since what is reported is strictly speaking true. But distorted news seems to be a fitting categorization, in view of the misleading quality of the information's presentation, in particular its selectivity and framing. In the Lisa case, reporting relied heavily on the events of the preceding New Year's Eve in Cologne, when police and media had only belatedly reported the sexual assault of hundreds of women,

<sup>19</sup> 'Staatsanwalt: Zwei Verdächtige im „Fall Lisa“ – Anwalt empört über Medien-Hetze', *Sputnik* 26 January 2016, <https://de.sputniknews.com/gesellschaft/20160126307389137-fall-lisa-medien-hetze/>.

<sup>20</sup> S. Lavrov, 'Remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on Russia's diplomacy performance in 2015', 26 January 2016, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2032328](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2032328).

<sup>21</sup> 'Der Fall Lisa: Politisierung eines Sexualverbrechens', *RT* (28 January 2016), available at <https://deutsch.rt.com/inland/36526-fall-lisa-politisierung-sexualverbrechens/>.

<sup>22</sup> 'Fall Lisa: Staatsanwaltschaft erhebt Anklage wegen "schweren sexuellen Missbrauchs"', *RT* (28 February 2017), <https://deutsch.rt.com/inland/47059-fall-lisa-nun-ermittelt-staatsanwaltschaft/>.

<sup>23</sup> Nechepurenko and Smale, 'Russia Dismisses German Warnings About Exploiting Teen Rape Claim', *The New York Times* (28 January 2016), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/world/europe/russia-dismisses-german-claims-of-exploiting-teen-rape-case.html>.

<sup>24</sup> 'Steinmeier weist Lawrow in die Schranken', *Die Zeit* (27 January 2016), available at <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2016-01/berlin-angebliche-vergewaltigung-kritik-aussenminister-sergej-lawrow>.

<sup>25</sup> Berlin Police, 'Verschwundenes Mädchen wurde nicht entführt', Polizeimitteilung Nr. 0167/2016, 18 January 2016, available at <https://www.berlin.de/polizei/polizeimeldungen/pressemitteilung.434674.php>.

<sup>26</sup> 'Staatsanwalt: Angeblich vergewaltigtes Mädchen verbrachte Nacht bei Freund', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (29 January 2017), available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/berlin-marzahn-staatsanwalt-angeblich-vergewaltigtes-maedchen-verbrachte-nacht-bei-freund-1.2840429>.

mostly by persons with an apparent migrant background.<sup>27</sup> Some thought this to be because of a ‘political correctness’ that sought to deceive the population as to the extent of the problems caused by the refugee crisis. This made a similar reading of the Lisa case, which was supported by Mr. Lavrov’s statement, seem plausible.

### c) Attributing Fake News

Legally attributing fake news to a State will often be difficult. First, it is possible to plant and distribute information on the internet without leaving significant traces as to its origin.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, today’s news are mostly distributed by separate legal entities that are government-funded. Sputnik is operated by the government-founded federal state unitary enterprise Rossiya Segodnya.<sup>29</sup> Although its editor-in-chief is simultaneously the head of Rossiya Segodnya,<sup>30</sup> RT is another separate entity.<sup>31</sup> Both, RT and Sputnik, are heavily funded by the Russian Government.<sup>32</sup>

The conduct of news corporations can be attributed to a State, under the customary rule reflected in Article 8 of the International Law Commission’s Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA),<sup>33</sup> if it can be shown that the State directed or controlled the company’s actions,<sup>34</sup> or that it instructed it to take a certain action<sup>35</sup>. As first held by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the *Nicaragua* case, and still generally accepted as stating the law, *effective control* of an entity’s actions is required, for which even heavy funding is in itself insufficient.<sup>36</sup> Naturally, news agencies will reject allegations of being government-controlled.

Exceptionally, one might consider attribution under Article 11 ARSIWA of conduct acknowledged and accepted by a State subsequently as its own. RT’s editor-in-chief was one of 300 journalists to be awarded a medal of the ‘Order of Service to the Fatherland’ by President Putin for the coverage of the Crimean conflict.<sup>37</sup> This certainly amounts to approval and endorsement; but mere congratulations are insufficient, perpetuation of the same conduct would be needed.<sup>38</sup> Awarding

<sup>27</sup> M. Eddy, ‘Reports of Attacks on Women in Germany Heighten Tension Over Migrants’, *The New York Times* (5 January 2016), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/06/world/europe/coordinated-attacks-on-women-in-cologne-were-unprecedented-germany-says.html>.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Pihelgas, ‘Back-Tracing and Anonymity in Cyberspace’, in K. Ziolkowski (ed.), *Peacetime Regime for State Activities in Cyberspace* (2013) 31, at 57-58.

<sup>29</sup> Executive order on measures to make state media more effective (9 December 2013), available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19805>.

<sup>30</sup> ‘RT editor Simonyan to head Kremlin-backed news agency’, *BBC* (31 December 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25560434>.

<sup>31</sup> Borchers, *supra* note 10, at 92.

<sup>32</sup> Spahn, *supra* note 13, at 13-14.

<sup>33</sup> International Law Commission (ILC), Report on the work of its fifty-third session (23 April-1 June and 2 July-10 August 2001), General Assembly, Official Records, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 10, UN Doc. A/56/10.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, at 48; J. Crawford, *State Responsibility: The General Part* (2013), at 161-165.

<sup>35</sup> M. N. Schmitt (ed.), *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations* (2017), at 95-96.

<sup>36</sup> *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, Judgment of 27 June 1986, ICJ Reports (1986) 14, at 62 and 64-65, paras. 109 and 115.

<sup>37</sup> A. Luhn, ‘Pro-Kremlin journalists win medals for “objective” coverage of Crimea’, *The Guardian* (5 May 2014), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/05/vladimir-putin-pro-kremlin-journalists-medals-objective-crimea>.

<sup>38</sup> ILC, *supra* note 33, at 53; *United States Diplomatic and Consular Staff in Tehran (United States of America v. Iran)*, Judgment of 24 May 1980, ICJ Reports (1980) 3, at 29-30, 35; see also: Crawford, *supra* note 34, at 181-188.



the medals, on its own, cannot in good faith be understood as the Russian Government adopting international responsibility for that news coverage.

Fake news spread by such companies will thus in most cases not be attributable to a State. Rumours of direct government influence on the editorial process, e.g. of the above-mentioned Channel One, persist, but they would not, on themselves, hold up in a court of law.<sup>39</sup>

### 3. The Legality of Fake News

#### a) Fake News as Intervention

Under customary international law, intervention by one State in the internal or external affairs of another is prohibited. As held in the *Nicaragua* case by the ICJ, the principle of non-intervention protects the area in which sovereignty allows States to decide freely; but it does so only with respect to interventions that are 'coercive'.<sup>40</sup> The range of actions between military intervention, which is clearly coercive, and offering one's good offices, which clearly isn't, is a large grey area.<sup>41</sup> However, from the UN General Assembly's Friendly Relations Declaration, which is generally accepted as reflecting custom,<sup>42</sup> it is clear that coerciveness is not restricted to the use of physical force.<sup>43</sup> The recent Tallinn Manual 2.0 defines coercion as 'an affirmative act designed to deprive another State of its freedom of choice, that is, to force that State to act in an involuntary manner or involuntarily refrain from acting in a particular way.'<sup>44</sup> As regards broadcasts, Jamnejad and Wood summarized the law of non-intervention as follows:

Whether a broadcast contravenes the non-intervention principle depends on all the circumstances. If it is deliberately false and intended to produce dissent or encourage insurgents, the non-intervention principle is likely to be breached. If factual and neutral, it is doubtful that the broadcast will constitute intervention, regardless of the effect it may in fact have ...<sup>45</sup>

The main problem in specifying the threshold of coerciveness seems to be that various forms of pressure, e.g. of an economic kind, are regarded as a legitimate and lawful part of international relations.<sup>46</sup> Others, such as incitement to revolutionary change,<sup>47</sup> pass the threshold.

<sup>39</sup> EU East Stratcom Task Force, 'Corruption and disinformation: Backstage at Russian television', 27 September 2017, available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/corruption-and-disinformation-backstage-at-russian-television/>; Ioffe, 'What Is Russia Today? The Kremlin's propaganda outlet has an identity crisis', *Columbia Journalism Review* (2010), available at [http://archives.cjr.org/feature/what\\_is\\_russia\\_today.php](http://archives.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php); Borchers, *supra* note 10, at 93.

<sup>40</sup> ICJ, *Nicaragua*, *supra* note 36, para. 205.

<sup>41</sup> Kunig, 'Intervention, Prohibition of', in R. Wolfrum (ed.), *The Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, vol. VI (2012), 289, at 289-291.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 264.

<sup>43</sup> Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, UN GA Res. 2625 (XXV), 24 October 1970; Damrosch, 'Politics Across Borders: Nonintervention and Nonforcible Influence over Domestic Affairs', 83 *American Journal of International Law (AJIL)* (1989) 1, at 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> Schmitt, *supra* note 35, at 317.

<sup>45</sup> Jamnejad and Wood, 'The Principle of Non-Intervention', 22 *Leiden Journal of International Law* (2009) 345, at 374.

<sup>46</sup> ICJ, *Nicaragua*, *supra* note 36, para. 245; see Damrosch, *supra* note 43, at 34, 42, 47.

Fake news in the strict sense (false news) may be coercive in the required sense. So far, there seems to be no state practice confirming this interpretation, but there are sufficient reasons that a State experiencing intervention by false news might advance to justify such a claim. First, economic pressure was rejected as a possible means of intervention because this would in effect have deprived States of changing their trading and development aid policy – which are generally a sovereign part of States' external affairs. Recognizing false news as a possible means of intervention would not have any other direct legal repercussions. Secondly, while false news does not constitute a 'threat' against decision-makers,<sup>48</sup> it is coercive in the sense that it manipulates their capacity to reason. Much clearer than leaking true information at a strategically chosen time,<sup>49</sup> it utilizes the 'forceless coercion of the better argument' in a manipulative way:<sup>50</sup>

Any rational decision is made based on facts.<sup>51</sup> People argue about and disagree which facts exist and what their significance for a decision is. But no rational person claims to make decisions unconnected to reality. Influencing a decision by introducing into the decision-making process false facts is coercive,<sup>52</sup> since the projection of a different set of facts constrains one's freedom to act by making certain options and conclusions no longer seem viable or others mandatory.<sup>53</sup> This was also the conclusion arrived at in the first Tallinn Manual.<sup>54</sup> 'Truth carries within itself an element of coercion', as Hannah Arendt put it.<sup>55</sup> For example, when contemplating whether to vote for a candidate, the (false) information that he or she committed a grave crime, might have a decisive impact on one's decision-making.

False news, such as Pizzagate, may thus violate the principle of non-intervention if its placement or dissemination were attributable to a State. Should such false news be planted covertly by a State, i.e. without revealing that its source is a State, this would be another factor indicating a violation of the principle because it deprives the addressees of critical information to assess the information's trustworthiness.<sup>56</sup> It cannot be necessary for a State to know that it is being compelled to act in a certain manner.<sup>57</sup> Such a view would exclude the most effective means of intervention from the scope of the prohibition. Moreover, the possibility of discovering the truth despite false news, or of

---

<sup>47</sup> De Brabandere, 'Propaganda', in R. Wolfrum (ed.), *The Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, vol. VIII (2012), 507, at 509, para. 11; see also M. J. Kearney, *The Prohibition of Propaganda for War in International Law* (2007), at 12; Preuss, 'International Responsibility for Hostile Propaganda against Foreign States', 28 *AJIL* (1934) 649, at 652, 654, 668.

<sup>48</sup> Ohlin, 'Did Russian Cyber-Interference in the 2016 Election Violate International Law?', 95 *Texas Law Review* (2017) 1579, at 1591-1592.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Goodman, 'International Law and the US Response to Russian Election Interference', *Just Security Blog* (5 January 2017), available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/35999/international-law-response-russian-election-interference/>.

<sup>50</sup> J. Habermas, *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, vol. I (1981), at 47, 52-53: 'zwangloser Zwang' – translation by the author.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Helbig et al., 'Will Democracy Survive Big Data and Artificial Intelligence?', *Scientific American* (25 February 2017), available at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/will-democracy-survive-big-data-and-artificial-intelligence/>.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Watts, 'Low-Intensity Cyber Operations and the Principle of Non-Intervention', in J. D. Ohlin et al. (eds.), *Cyberwar* (2015) 249, at 261.

<sup>53</sup> Brennan, 'Making Sense of Lies, Deceptive Propaganda, and Fake News', 32:3 *Journal of Media Ethics* (2017) 179, at 180; cf. N. Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, (2nd ed., 1996), at 156.

<sup>54</sup> M. N. Schmitt (ed.), *Tallinn Manual on the International Law applicable to Cyber Warfare* (2013), at 45. Tallinn Manual 2.0 seems to have dropped the example, but see Schmitt, *supra* note 35, at 124.

<sup>55</sup> Arendt, *supra* note 11, at 239-241.

<sup>56</sup> See *infra* section 5 A; cf. Damrosch, *supra* note 43, at 49.

<sup>57</sup> Which was the minority view in Tallinn Manual 2.0: Schmitt, *supra* note 35, at 320-321.

not being moved by false news, is not relevant, since an intervention's illegality is not predicated on it being successful.<sup>58</sup>

In elections, the state decision-making body whose decision is sought to be influenced in that manner is the citizens voting as the people.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, there is also a direct link between the influence exerted and the State's decision-making process. False news crashing the stock market, on the other hand, does not have such a direct effect on any decision by a state organ, and would – at least in itself – not constitute intervention. A threat of placing such false news if certain conditions are not complied with, however, may establish such a link and constitute intervention.

Fake news in a wider sense (distorted news), however, will not violate the principle of non-intervention.<sup>60</sup> Mere framing and presentation of true facts cannot be held to be coercive in the sense required. In essence, framing and selection constitute a normative argument that considers the selected information and framing to be appropriate. Such arguments are generally, and rightly so, considered a legitimate and lawful part of international discourse. Mere criticism of the internal politics of another State, and be it biased, is not prohibited intervention.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, and irrespective of attribution, RT's and Sputnik's factually correct coverage of the Lisa case could not have violated the principle of non-intervention. Neither did Mr. Lavrov's remarks.

### **b) The 1936 International Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace<sup>62</sup>**

Some of the difficulties encountered when applying the law of non-intervention to fake news are addressed by the LON's 1936 Broadcasting Convention. The treaty, inter alia and without using that term, covers false news as defined above. It is still in force, as confirmed post-WWII by the UN General Assembly.<sup>63</sup>

#### **aa) Its Content and History**

The Convention's purpose, as expressed in its preamble and operating provisions, is the safeguarding of 'good international understanding'. This common interest is protected from certain broadcasts. For the purposes of this article, the central provision is Article 3 (1), which according to its *travaux préparatoires* was explicitly meant to cover news:<sup>64</sup>

The High Contracting Parties mutually undertake to prohibit and, if occasion arises, to stop without delay within their respective territories any transmission likely to harm good international understanding by statements the incorrectness of which is or ought to be known to the persons responsible for the broadcast.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Schmitt, *ibid.*, at 322.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Damrosch, *supra* 43, at 49.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., also concerning false information: M. N. Schmitt, "Virtual" Disenfranchisement: Cyber Election Meddling in the Grey Zones of International Law', Exeter Centre for International Law Working Paper Series 2018/3, at 15-17.

<sup>61</sup> Kunig, *supra* note 41, at 293; De Brabandere, *supra* note 47, at 510 § 14; Schmitt, *supra* note 35, at 318-319.

<sup>62</sup> 186 LNTS 301 (Broadcasting Convention).

<sup>63</sup> GA Res. 841(IX), 17 December 1954; but cf. OSCE (Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media), *Propaganda and Freedom of the Media* (2015), at 12, considering the treaty to be obsolete without giving reasons.

<sup>64</sup> 'Preliminary Draft International Agreement for the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace', C.12.1934.XII, Annex 1, 4 January 1934, at 4.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. J. B. Whitton and A. Larson, *Propaganda* (1964), at 255, holding Art. 3 to address 'false news'.

The Convention addresses two issues that may prevent the application of the non-intervention principle to fake news: attribution of private actors' conduct as well as the threshold of coerciveness. First, according to its Art. 6, States Parties need to ensure its application against public as well as private broadcasters.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, broadcasts need not pass a threshold of coerciveness to violate the Convention. Article 4 Broadcasting Convention even establishes a due diligence obligation to ensure that stations broadcast information concerning international relations, especially in times of crisis, 'the accuracy of which shall have been verified – and that by all means within their power – by the persons responsible for broadcasting the information'; or in more modern parlance: to 'fact-check' before broadcasting. Neglecting to fact-check clearly cannot in itself be considered coercive conduct. The treaty can therefore be understood as an attempt to fill a gap left by the principle of non-intervention.

The Convention was part of 'moral disarmament' efforts after World War I<sup>67</sup> and a reaction to the pervasive use of broadcasting for aggressive political propaganda, in particular by Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>68</sup> Contemporaneous critique argued that the States likely to ratify the Convention would not have resorted to such broadcasting anyway.<sup>69</sup>

Before and during the Second World War, the Convention did not play any significant role. 22 States joined, among them the UK, India, France, Australia and Chile. But Germany, Japan and Italy never signed, the USSR signed but did not ratify the Convention before the war.<sup>70</sup> The US showed a cooperative attitude but declined to join because of the high value that its constitution accords to free speech.<sup>71</sup>

After the war, the UN for a time tried to revitalize the Convention,<sup>72</sup> and, in 1982, the USSR ratified it – almost 50 years after signing. At the time, the Soviet Union was accusing Western States of subversive propaganda,<sup>73</sup> often jamming Western radio signals.<sup>74</sup> Western radio stations broadcasting in Russian, such as Radio Free Europe, were accused of interfering in the internal affairs of socialist States.<sup>75</sup>

Having been the first State to professionally use the radio for international propaganda, broadcasting in numerous languages,<sup>76</sup> the Soviet Union was now seeking to ward off outside interference, sometimes interpreting the prohibition of intervention so broadly as to cover any news coverage of events concerning socialist States.<sup>77</sup> This, however, was not a generally accepted

---

<sup>66</sup> Cf. De Brabandere, *supra* note 47, at 509-510, para. 12.

<sup>67</sup> 'Preliminary Draft Broadcasting Convention', *supra* note 64, at 1. For the adoption process: L. J. Martin, *International Propaganda* (1958), at 66-81.

<sup>68</sup> See: C.201.1934.VII, 16 May 1934, at 6; Whitton, 'War by Radio', *Foreign Affairs* (April 1941), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1941-04-01/war-radio>; Joeden, 'Die Funksendefreiheit der Staaten', 4 *Jahrbuch für Internationales Recht* (1952/1953) 71, at 82-83.

<sup>69</sup> Whitton and Larson, *supra* note 65, at 126-127.

<sup>70</sup> *The New York Times* (27 March 1936), at 17; see also: Kearney, *supra* note 47, at 30-31.

<sup>71</sup> See the Draft International Convention for the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace, C.L.44.1936.XII, 16 March 1936, at 22.

<sup>72</sup> GA Res. 2021 (XX), 5 November 1965; GA Res 841(IX), 17 December 1954.

<sup>73</sup> Simma, 'Grenzüberschreitender Informationsfluß und domaine réservé der Staaten', 19 *Berichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Völkerrecht* (1979) 39, at 59-63.

<sup>74</sup> Martin, *supra* note 67, at 85-87.

<sup>75</sup> Roth, 'Cuius regio – eius informatio: Die Ratifizierung des Rundfunkfriedenspaktes durch die Sowjetunion und die „Neue Weltinformationsordnung“', 34 *Osteuropa* (1984) 559, at 561.

<sup>76</sup> Mikkonen, 'To control the world's information flows – Soviet Cold War broadcasting', in A. Badenoch *et al.* (eds.), *Airy Curtains in the European Ether: Broadcasting and the Cold War* (2013) 241, at 242-243.

<sup>77</sup> Simma, *supra* note 73, at 63; Roth, *supra* note 75, at 566-567.

interpretation. Considering that the Western stations' stated purpose was to impart correct information without inciting revolt,<sup>78</sup> these broadcasts were not considered by Western scholars to constitute prohibited intervention.<sup>79</sup>

Ratifying the Broadcasting Convention, and calling on all other States to ratify it as well,<sup>80</sup> was intended as a step to improve the USSR's legal position as against Western broadcasts.<sup>81</sup> This interpretation is corroborated by Western States' reaction to this accession: Australia, France and the UK denounced it,<sup>82</sup> and the US welcomed that step to further the free flow of information<sup>83</sup>. The, by now publicly available, internal justification of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for acceding to the Convention in 1984 further clarifies socialist States' motivation:

In order to deal with the intensified confrontation politics by the most aggressive parts of Imperialism – especially in the UN and the UNESCO –, the Convention is of particular importance today. At the same time, it can serve as an important instrument in the struggle of all progressive, democratic forces for a new international information order. For these reasons, the USSR ... called [on other States] to strengthen the Convention with as many accessions as possible and to do everything to stand up against the abuse of modern mass media for intervention in the internal affairs of States, for subversive propaganda and for fomenting hostility between peoples. The USSR has also asked the GDR to consider acceding to the Convention.<sup>84</sup>

The background to the rather unexpected resurgence of interest in the Convention is therefore evident.<sup>85</sup> The Soviet Union's own propaganda activities make the decision seem possibly counterproductive. But the GDR at least perceived no risks in this regard, considering itself to be in full compliance with the Convention's provisions:

From the GDR's accession, no substantive effects will result as regards the implementation of the Convention's obligations. There is no need to change existing legal provisions or pass new ones.<sup>86</sup>

Just to be on the safe side, however, no socialist State failed to enter a reservation that excluded the jurisdiction of the ICJ, as the PCIJ's successor,<sup>87</sup> in Article 7 Broadcasting Convention.

---

<sup>78</sup> See the 'Excerpts from the US Information Agency Basic Guidance Paper of 1957', printed in Whitton and Larson, *supra* note 65, at 268-273.

<sup>79</sup> Simma, *supra* note 73, at 68; cf. Whitton and Larson, *supra* note 65, at 52.

<sup>80</sup> Roth, *supra* note 75, at 559.

<sup>81</sup> B. Lange, *Medienpolitik des Völkerbundes* (1991), at 114-115; cf. C. Breunig, *Kommunikationspolitik der UNESCO* (1987), at 88; Schönbeck, 'Die Resolution der Vereinten Nationen vom 10. Dezember 1982 über Prinzipien für das Direkte Satellitenfernsehen', 32 *Zeitschrift für Luft- und Weltraumrecht* (1983) 16, at 16, 20.

<sup>82</sup> See for details:

[https://treaties.un.org/Pages/LONViewDetails.aspx?src=LON&id=513&chapter=30&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/LONViewDetails.aspx?src=LON&id=513&chapter=30&clang=_en).

<sup>83</sup> Goldberg, 'Transnational Communication and Defamatory Speech: A Case for Establishing Norms for the Twenty-First Century', 50 *New York Law School Law Review* (2005) 145, at 153-154.

<sup>84</sup> 'Vorlage für den Ministerrat der DDR vom 28.5.1984 zum Beschluss über den Beitritt der DDR zur Internationalen Konvention über den Gebrauch des Rundfunks im Interesse des Friedens vom 23. September 1936' [Draft for the Council of Ministers of the GDR on the Accession to the Broadcasting Convention], *BArch* [Federal Archive of Germany] DC 20 I/4 / 85382, at 128 – translation by the author.

<sup>85</sup> See also G.-H. Gornig, *Äußerungsfreiheit und Informationsfreiheit als Menschenrechte* (1988), at 439-440.

<sup>86</sup> Draft for the Council of Ministers, *supra* note 84.

<sup>87</sup> Art. 37 ICJ-Statute.

### bb) Applicability to New Communication Technology

The English wording of the Convention ('broadcasting') seems more open to modern mass media than the equally authentic French wording ('radiodiffusion'). However, 'radiodiffusion' was meant to denote the means by which information is transferred, not the content; Hertzian waves in contrast to cables ('câblodiffusion').<sup>88</sup> In any case, the customary rule reflected in Article 33 VCLT calls for the resolution of conflicting language versions according to the treaty's object and purpose. As evidenced by the preamble and clearly stated in the *travaux préparatoires*, the purpose of the Convention was to combat the dangers for international peace and security emanating from a certain use of modern information technology that for the first time allowed information to directly reach many persons in other countries, while the territorial State was unable to effectively counter it.<sup>89</sup> New mass media like television<sup>90</sup> or the internet<sup>91</sup> obviously have the same properties. The Convention's effectiveness as a law-making treaty justifies this dynamic interpretation.<sup>92</sup>

### cc) Applicability to Modern Fake News

While Article 3 of the Broadcasting Convention certainly applies to false news, it is questionable if it is violated by merely distorted news.<sup>93</sup> This would not only be inconsistent with the ordinary meaning of 'incorrectness', since, despite postmodern doubts in the scientific community,<sup>94</sup> whether a statement is 'correct' or 'incorrect' is in ordinary language determined by a simple correspondence theory of truth, i.e. the accordance of the statement with reality. This was also the view of the Drafting Committee: 'The word "incorrectness" is taken in the current sense of allegations inconsistent with the truth.'<sup>95</sup> The French 'inexactitude' seems somewhat more open to a wider interpretation, but ultimately the purpose of Article 3 is to counter false information, not incorrect interpretations or a certain presentation of facts. The LON already used the category of 'distorted' news for the latter.<sup>96</sup>

Would fake news such as Pizzagate, the White House attack and the Lisa case violate the Convention?<sup>97</sup> The first two include false statements, the incorrectness of which at least ought to be known to its original authors. But are they likely to harm good international understanding? In themselves, they have no international component. Whether these broadcasts were transmitted from within another State's territory is unclear and also an explicit requirement of Article 3.

<sup>88</sup> See the Draft Broadcasting Convention, *supra* note 71, at 15. The term's meaning remaining obscure, the *travaux préparatoires* may be subsidiarily resorted to, Art. 32 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT), 1155 UNTS 331.

<sup>89</sup> LON, *supra* note 9, at 47, 91, 157.

<sup>90</sup> E. Menghetti, *Die völkerrechtliche Stellung des internationalen Satellitenfernsehens im Spannungsfeld von Völkerverständigung und Propaganda* (1992), at 138.

<sup>91</sup> M. Gets, *Meinungsäußerungs- und Informationsfreiheit im Internet aus Sicht des Völkerrechts* (2002), at 134-135.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Dausès, 'Direct Television Broadcasting by Satellites and Freedom of Information', 3 *Journal of Space Law* (1975) 59, at 71; Krause, 'Der Rundfunkfriedenspakt von 1936', 9 *Jahrbuch für Internationales Recht* (1961) 31, at 46.

<sup>93</sup> Affirmative: Krause, *ibid.*, at 49; Lange, *supra* note 81, at 109; Gornig, *supra* note 85, at 427.

<sup>94</sup> See for an overview: Searle, 'Why Should You Believe It?', *The New York Review of Books* (24 September 2009), at 88.

<sup>95</sup> See the Draft Broadcasting Convention, *supra* note 71, at 16.

<sup>96</sup> League of Nations, *supra* note 9.

<sup>97</sup> Leaving aside the question of ratification to assess the treaty's potential effectiveness. The US never acceded and reunified Germany did not automatically succeed the GDR: Odendahl, in O. Dörr and K. Schmalenbach (eds.), *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties* (2012), Article 29, para. 33.

Consequently, the Broadcasting Convention in substance prohibits false news, but in practice, it may often be hard to know if its more formal requirements are fulfilled.

With regard to the Lisa case, the harm to good international understanding is palpable, as evidenced by the ministers' exchange on the issue, but no statements that are incorrect were made, so Article 3 Broadcasting Convention was not violated. Moreover, only the broadcast by Channel One for certain had its source within the territory of the Russian Federation. RT, as well as Sputnik, also operate facilities in Berlin.<sup>98</sup> Broadcasts from this location would not be covered by the Convention, which is solely meant to provide redress for broadcasts from abroad – for which the receiving State has no territorial jurisdiction.

#### **4. Remedies Against Fake News**

Remedies against fake news may be reactive, but also preventive.

##### **a) Right to Correction**

When false news violates the principle of non-intervention, its correction and acknowledgment as false could be demanded as restitution and satisfaction respectively under Articles 35 and 37 ARSIWA. Article 3(2) of the Broadcasting Convention also requires States Parties to establish a procedure to publicly rectify incorrect, i.e. false, statements that harm good international understanding, regardless if that incorrectness could have been known in advance.

##### **b) Right to Reply**

The – somewhat misnomered – 1953 Convention on the International Right of Correction<sup>99</sup> gives a special right to States Parties against news material that is distributed by news agencies to end-user media ('news dispatches' within the meaning of Article I) in its Article II (1):

... in cases where a Contracting State contends that a news dispatch capable of injuring its relations with other States or its national prestige or dignity transmitted from one country to another by correspondents or information agencies of a Contracting or non-contracting State and published or disseminated abroad is false or distorted, it may submit its version of the facts (hereinafter called 'communiqué') to the Contracting States within whose territories such dispatch has been published or disseminated.

The State receiving a communiqué satisfying the formal requirements of Article II (2) must, 'whatever be its opinion concerning the facts', distribute it through the channels it usually uses for communications on international affairs and to the news agency responsible (Article III). If the State fails to comply with its obligations under Article III, the UN Secretary-General shall 'give publicity to the information' (Article IV). All these obligations are subject to strict time-limits.

Like the Broadcasting Convention's duty to rectify, the 'right of correction' established by the Correction Convention's unwieldy language applies to private and public news agencies, irrespective of any prior knowledge of the shortcomings of the statement made and only in an international context. Unlike it, the Correction Convention's right explicitly applies even to distorted news, and is directed against any State Party in whose territory a foreign news agency's

---

<sup>98</sup> Spahn, *supra* note 13, at 19, 21.

<sup>99</sup> 435 UNTS 191.

dispatch was disseminated – even if its origin is in a non-contracting State. The Convention allows aggrieved States to have their side of the story heard. The ‘international right of correction’ is thus really a right to reply for States supported by the duty of other States Parties and the UN to amplify it.

Could the Correction Convention have been a tool for Germany in the Lisa case? Leaving aside the question of ratification (neither Germany nor Russia is a party), probably not. Germany would not have had a right to have a communiqué disseminated in Russia, since the news dispatch from the news agency Sputnik originated domestically in Russia, not from abroad. Moreover, it was rather its effects inside Germany, not in other States, that mattered. An example from the Cold War in which it could have been applied in a sensible manner is a dispatch by Novosti, Sputnik’s predecessor news agency, that stated in 1987 that the US had developed an ‘ethnic weapon’ that would kill only ‘Africans’.<sup>100</sup>

### **c) Counter-Propaganda**

In 2015, the European Council took action against ‘Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns’<sup>101</sup> by creating under the auspices of the EU External Action Service, an ‘East StratCom Task Force’ which seeks to raise awareness for and debunk fake news.<sup>102</sup> In addition, national units could be established that monitor the news cycle for items that seem to be pushed strategically, like the Lisa case.<sup>103</sup> Their task would be to alert relevant authorities and actors to the potential impact of such news and allow them to respond in a more timely and coordinated manner with appropriate information on their own.

For example, German police could have pooled more resources into solving the Lisa case more quickly. Instead of refusing to release more information on the case, as they initially did, they could have – carefully – given appropriate additional weight to the public information interest when balancing it against Lisa’s and her family’s privacy rights. Of course, this could only be one aspect in a complex balancing exercise not only legally but also from a policy perspective. Institutions need to be careful not to be driven by others’ agenda-setting.

## **5. The Lessons Learned and Contemporary Challenges for Countering Fake News**

To date, over thirty States remain party to the Broadcasting Convention, in particular the Russian Federation, Hungary, Latvia and Estonia, but also Brazil, India, Egypt, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. Most recently, in 2005, Liberia acceded to it.<sup>104</sup> The Correction Convention has 17 parties.<sup>105</sup> Most recently, in 2005 and 2006 respectively, Liberia and Montenegro acceded.

These conventions may yet play a role in the future if States Parties choose to rely on them in case disputes within their ambit arise. But their general importance as hard law is certainly limited.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Soviets accuse U.S. of “ethnic weapon” in war of words’, *Chicago Tribune* (7 June 1987), at 20.

<sup>101</sup> European Council, Conclusions of 19/20 March, EUCO 11/15, para. 13.

<sup>102</sup> European Parliament, *supra* note 14, at 42-44.

<sup>103</sup> J. Janda, *The Lisa case: STRATCOM Lessons for European states*, German Federal Academy of Security Policy, Security Policy Working Paper No. 11/2016.

<sup>104</sup> For the ratification status: [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/LONViewDetails.aspx?src=LON&id=513&chapter=30&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/LONViewDetails.aspx?src=LON&id=513&chapter=30&clang=_en).

<sup>105</sup> For the ratification status see: [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XVII-1&chapter=17&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVII-1&chapter=17&clang=_en).



Neither convention was ever applied in practice so far, and, as far as can be seen, Sweden was the only State to implement the Broadcasting Convention in its national law after WWII.<sup>106</sup>

Nonetheless, from their drafting process, from the Broadcasting Convention's late ratification by socialist States, and from the fact that the conventions were never applied in practice, insights may be gained for future attempts at regulating fake news. On the other hand, modern developments and insights need to be taken into account when applying the conventions today.

### a) The Complexities of the Information Age

When addressing fake news, the LON, just like the UN, operated on the assumption that there is a way of reporting news which is not only factually correct but also objective in the sense that the image of reality that emerges in the recipients from this information is an undistorted and non-tendentious representation of reality: 'The press should not be propagandist, but should simply purvey the raw material, the good with the bad'.<sup>107</sup> Strictly speaking, this ideal is unattainable for modern mass media.

Just like a map can never correspond entirely to the territory it represents, information can never correspond to reality in every detail.<sup>108</sup> News' selectivity, its purposeful reduction of reality's complexity, is not a bug, but a feature: It performs the important function of reducing all the available information to a form that is processable for humans.<sup>109</sup> Taking this into account, mass media cannot but distort reality – even if the information reported is in itself correct – if what is meant by 'distortion' is that the picture emerging from the information is not a perfect representation of reality.<sup>110</sup>

The necessity to select information always existed but is exacerbated by the modern overabundance of information that threatens to overburden our cognitive capacities. Modern habits of information intake, or rather coping mechanisms (such as reading only the headline), may aggravate the situation further, just like algorithms, creating 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers'.<sup>111</sup> Automated 'bots' try to profit from mechanisms such as these.<sup>112</sup>

Knowing all this, how is it still possible to accept the information available to us as reality? The answer is trust. We trust in the reliability of the available information, while at the same time being critically aware of its insufficiency and incompleteness – and even of the possibility of manipulation.<sup>113</sup> Trust allows us to compensate for a lack of information which we, individually and in groups, can never completely avoid.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> UN (ed.), *Freedom of Information: A Compilation*, Vol. II (1950), at 115.

<sup>107</sup> US representative Binder, in ECOSOC (Sub-Commission of Information and the Press), E/CN4/Sub.1/SR.104, 25 March 1952, at 5.

<sup>108</sup> Luhmann, *supra* note 53, at 56-57, 138 et seq.

<sup>109</sup> See White, "'The Gatekeeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News', 27:1 *Journalism Quarterly* (1950) 383.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. H. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (1979), at 304-308; Luhmann, *supra* note 53, at 173-174.

<sup>111</sup> Helbig et al., *supra* note 51.

<sup>112</sup> See e.g. J. Echeverria and S. Zhou, *The 'Star Wars' botnet with >350k Twitter bots*, 10 January 2017, available at <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1701.02405v1.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. N. Luhmann, *Vertrauen* (5th ed., 2014), at 68.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, at 125-126.

Fake news seeks to undermine that trust. It may have always existed, but its reach has increased greatly due to modern social media mechanisms.<sup>115</sup> A seemingly widespread ‘post-truth’ attitude that cares not so much for the information’s objective accuracy as its ‘truthiness’, i.e. a subjective ring of truth in conformity with one’s worldview,<sup>116</sup> is widely held to have contributed to its success. It may explain why a significant number of people seem to consider partisan media more objective than ‘mainstream media’ adhering to traditional journalistic standards.

In a sense, fake news feeds on postmodern insecurities and the complexity of the contemporary information situation. Interviewed in 2015, RT’s editor-in-chief told TIME magazine: ‘No one shows objective reality ... The Western media are not objective, reality-based news sources.’<sup>117</sup> All there is are different perspectives, all of which are equally valid. Ultimately, ‘nothing is believable, or worth believing, anymore’.<sup>118</sup>

Basically, it is claimed that there is no free press that tries the humanly possible to inform the public accurately and in a balanced manner about events judged to be relevant. It confuses the necessity of choosing selection factors with the choice of a political selection factor that systematically strives to downplay inconvenient information and gives great prominence to information believed to be politically expedient.<sup>119</sup> Avoiding such a factor is precisely what makes media objective.<sup>120</sup>

It is submitted that distinguishing between false and distorted news is of crucial importance for the general discourse about fake news and any attempt at regulation. Fact-checkers – journalists as well as institutions like StratCom – should not, as they apparently currently do, ‘use almost interchangeably’ the terms ‘false’ and ‘misleading’.<sup>121</sup> When RT labelled the recurring claim by traditional media that its coverage of the Lisa case had been ‘fake news’<sup>122</sup> as fake news,<sup>123</sup> it was right if one defines ‘fake news’ solely as ‘false news’. Had the other media called out RT for the distortive quality of its coverage, that charge would have been much harder to refute.

### **b) The Limits of Legal Regulation**

False news is, and can be legitimately, regulated repressively. States are prohibited from deliberately producing false news at least in certain constellations under the Broadcasting Convention and the principle of non-intervention. Private actors might also be held to that

<sup>115</sup> Brennen, ‘Making Sense of Lies, Deceptive Propaganda, and Fake News’, 32:3 *Journal of Media Ethics* (2017) 179, at 180.

<sup>116</sup> Perlman, ‘How truthful is your “truthiness”?’, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 11 August 2015, available at [https://www.cjr.org/analysis/how\\_truthful\\_is\\_your\\_truthiness.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/how_truthful_is_your_truthiness.php).

<sup>117</sup> Inside Putin’s On-Air Machine, *Time Magazine* (26 March 2015), available at <http://time.com/rt-putin/>.

<sup>118</sup> Gendreau, *supra* note 7.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Frankfurt, ‘On Bullshit’, in H. G. Frankfurt (ed.), *The Importance of What We Care About* (1988) 117, at 130-131.

<sup>120</sup> Gans, *supra* note 110, at 182.

<sup>121</sup> Graves, *supra* note 8, at 75; same approach by the European Commission, *supra* note 6, at 10-11.

<sup>122</sup> J. Röpke and J. Vollmer, ‘Propaganda mit einer angeblichen Vergewaltigung’, *Bild* (26 January 2016), available at <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/npd/wie-russland-mit-angeblicher-vergewaltigung-propaganda-macht-44289532.bild.html>.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Der Fall Lisa – Die hartnäckigste Fake News über RT Deutsch’, *RT* (6 December 2016), available at <https://deutsch.rt.com/gesellschaft/43975-fall-lisa-hartnackigste-fake-news/>.

standard, but their human rights need to be taken into account. It should be noted that even state-owned or state-funded corporate entities may enjoy international human rights protection.<sup>124</sup>

According to Article 19 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>125</sup> and Article 10 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR),<sup>126</sup> the threshold for considering that a person ‘ought to know’ the incorrectness of a statement would have to be set rather high. Under the ECHR, for example, journalists must ‘[act] in good faith and ma[k]e sure that the articles were written in compliance with ordinary journalistic obligations to verify factual allegations [that infringe on people’s private life e.g.]’<sup>127</sup> ‘to the extent permitted by the circumstances’<sup>128, 129</sup> Also, the harm to good international understanding that Art. 3 Broadcasting Convention requires would have to be interpreted narrowly.<sup>130</sup>

Distorted news on the other hand is considerably more difficult to grasp legally. The old concerns of overly restricting freedom of speech for legitimate actors are still well-founded.<sup>131</sup> It would certainly be possible to decide case-by-case, taking into account freedom of speech, which kind of news is sufficiently distorted to count as fake news, developing generalizable standards in the process. The British communications regulator Ofcom is doing just that. For example, in 2015, Ofcom found RT to be in breach of its Broadcasting Code: RT had not shown ‘due impartiality’<sup>132</sup> and had ‘materially misled’ the audience<sup>133</sup>.

I would caution against going down that path any further. Considering the degree to which all news – and even its modern sub-genre of fact-checking –<sup>134</sup> struggles with balanced and accurate reporting,<sup>135</sup> only extreme cases could legitimately be taken to violate such provisions, taking into account the right to freedom of expression. Generally, for distorted news, the right to freedom of expression will stand in the way of repressive sanctions. And rightly so. The potential for abuse is immense.<sup>136</sup>

Governmental information can address distorted news, and a right to reply, if available, might be conducive, too. From a human rights perspective, the right to reply established by the Correction Convention is indeed entirely unproblematic: it obliges only States and the UN to disseminate the reply, without imposing a duty of publication on any private actor. Since nowadays any State can easily contact any news organization and publish press releases that are available instantaneously worldwide via the internet, the added value of the right might lie in the help of other States or the UN in giving it more publicity. A noteworthy feature of the Correction Convention, as regards

<sup>124</sup> ECtHR, *Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines v. Turkey*, App. No. 40998/98, 13 December 2007, paras. 78-81; see on this: Happold, ‘Who Benefits from Human Rights Treaties?’, in I. Riassetto et al. (eds.), *Liber Amicorum Rusen Ergeç* (2017) 117, at 123-124.

<sup>125</sup> 999 UNTS 171.

<sup>126</sup> ETS 5.

<sup>127</sup> ECtHR, *Olafsson v. Iceland*, App. No. 58493/13, Judgment of 16 March 2017, paras. 53-62; see also W. Schabas, *The European Convention on Human Rights* (2015), at 468-469.

<sup>128</sup> ECtHR, *Heinisch v. Germany*, App. No. 28274/08, Judgment of 21 June 2017, paras. 67.

<sup>129</sup> See also C. Grabenwarter, *European Convention on Human Rights: Commentary* (2014), Art. 10, paras. 52-55.

<sup>130</sup> According to Art. 31 (3) lit. c VCLT.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Kearney, *supra* note 47, at 8-11; see already: Whitton and Larson, *supra* note 65, at 137-138.

<sup>132</sup> *Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin*, Issue Number 288 (21 September 2015), at 10, 49-60, available at [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/50507/issue\\_288.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/50507/issue_288.pdf).

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, at 46-48.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Graves, *supra* note 8, at 53-54, 77-78, 87-112, 216 et seq.

<sup>135</sup> See e.g. Gans, *supra* note 110, at 249 et seq.

<sup>136</sup> Reporters Without Borders, ‘Predators of press freedom use fake news as a censorship tool’, 16 March 2017, available at <https://rsf.org/en/news/predators-press-freedom-use-fake-news-censorship-tool>.

attribution, is that it allows taking action against news emanating from a State that is not a party to it by establishing a cooperative network of other States. It might, to a certain extent, be a role model for mechanisms that do not rely on attribution of conduct at all.

This is all the more important since, in practice, false news is mostly distributed by informal websites and through user-generated content, while distorted news is mostly created and distributed by formal news agencies and outlets.<sup>137</sup> So, while false news could be regulated in a sensible manner, the prospects of finding its source, let alone attribution to a State, will in practice often be low. Inversely, the source of distorted news is often easier to identify, but is in substance harder to regulate. While this is certainly a less-than-optimal state of affairs, since it allows for circumnavigating international law, it is hard to see how a change in the rules of attribution could address this without serious side-effects.<sup>138</sup>

The law may, however, serve to strengthen the trust vested in the free media as an institution in various ways. For example, antitrust law and subsidies can, if applied neutrally, serve to preserve a plurality of media, which is not only necessary as a reflection of the political spectrum, but as an institutionalization of distrust in any one press organ – which verifies trust in the institution as a whole.<sup>139</sup>

## 6. Concluding Observations

Regulating fake news can be lawful and legitimate – up to a certain point. What must be avoided at all costs is developing a double standard: that fake news is illegal only if employed by ‘the others’. Most of the examples in this article concern Russian media, which may appear to be distortive in its own right. In fact, this focus is owed to the allegations levelled against Russian media from many sides – and the ready availability of examples provided by Soviet disinformation practices.<sup>140</sup>

Western States, it should be noted, also have a track record of information operations.<sup>141</sup> During the Cold War, Western stations were indeed meant to destabilize the USSR and other Eastern European States, but they sought to stay factually correct because this was considered to be more effective.<sup>142</sup>

Any legal standard concerning fake news must therefore be a rather formal and potentially universal one, applicable without reference to overly particularist values, or worse: one’s geopolitical leanings. Otherwise, action taken against outlets such as Sputnik or RT might well set a precedent which authoritarian regimes can rely on for clamping down on more legitimate news networks.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Pronay and Taylor, “An Improper Use of Broadcasting...” *The British Government and Clandestine Radio Propaganda Operations against Germany during the Munich Crisis and After*, 19:3 *Journal of Contemporary History* (1984) 357, at 365; Spahn, *supra* note 13, at 91 et seq.

<sup>138</sup> Krieger, ‘Krieg gegen anonymous. Völkerrechtliche Regelungsmöglichkeiten bei unsicherer Zurechnung im Cyberwar’, 50 *Archiv des Völkerrechts* (2012) 1, at 11 et seq.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Luhmann, *supra* note 113, at 77, 118-119; Human Rights Committee (HRC), General comment No. 34, 12 September 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34, at 40.

<sup>140</sup> See e.g. R. Shultz and R. Godson, *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy* (1984), at 133-157, at 149.

<sup>141</sup> Pronay and Taylor, *supra* note 137, at 362; ‘Radio Free Europe’, in *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military* (2001).

<sup>142</sup> N. Schlosser, *Cold War on the Airwaves: The Radio Propaganda War Against East Germany* (2015), at 57-58, 73-105.

Post-WWII, democratic States widely thought a free and pluralistic press to be the best safeguard against fake news.<sup>143</sup> While this should still hold true,<sup>144</sup> considering today's overabundance of information, the free flow of information might need some assistance.<sup>145</sup> Since the complexity of the information age will not disappear, strategies to manage it are necessary. Trust and distrust are both tools that allow us to deal with the complexity of the information confronting us. Making it easier for audiences to verify the trust vested in media might be a sensible step. Transparency as regards media's source of capital and highlighting existing safeguards for their independence may be conducive.<sup>146</sup> For such transparency to be of use, media and digital literacy must be promoted,<sup>147</sup> and the information must be easily accessible. Answering distortion with distortive counter-propaganda, however, only creates more distortion, and therefore precisely the untrustworthy information environment that fake news aims at.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> UN, *supra* note 9, at 204-220.

<sup>144</sup> Richardson, 'Fake News and Journalism Education', *27:1 Asia Pacific Media Educator* (2017) 1, at 3.

<sup>145</sup> See already: UN, *supra* note 9, at 56 et seq.; Whitton and Larson, *supra* note 65, at 247-248.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. European Commission, *supra* note 6, at 22, 25.

<sup>147</sup> UN et. al., *supra* note 6, at 3e.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. European Parliament, *supra* note 14, at 46.

## The Author



Dr. Björnstjern Baade is a senior research fellow at Freie Universität Berlin. During his studies in Berlin and Birmingham, he had the opportunity to gain experience, inter alia, at the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, the German Foreign Office, and the German Federal Constitutional Court. His doctoral thesis focussed on the methodology and legitimacy of the European Court of Human Rights, where he also conducted a research stay. In the research group „Towards a Proceduralization of International Law?“ of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, he pursues his habilitation project on questions of law and truth.

---

The Kolleg-Forschergruppe “The International Rule of Law – Rise or Decline?” examines the role of international law in a changing global order. Can we, under the current significantly changing conditions, still observe an increasing juridification of international relations based on a universal understanding of values, or are we, to the contrary, rather facing a tendency towards an informalization or a reformalization of international law, or even an erosion of international legal norms? Would it be appropriate to revisit classical elements of international law in order to react to structural changes, which may give rise to a more polycentric or non-polar world order? Or are we simply observing a slump in the development towards an international rule of law based on a universal understanding of values?

The Research Group brings together international lawyers and political scientists from five institutions in the Berlin-Brandenburg region: Freie Universität Berlin, Hertie School of Governance, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Universität Potsdam and Social Science Research Center Berlin (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin). An important pillar of the Research Group consists of the fellow programme for international researchers who visit the Research Group for periods up to two years. Individual research projects pursued benefit from dense interdisciplinary exchanges among senior scholars, practitioners, postdoctoral fellows and doctoral students from diverse academic backgrounds.