How to Help Companies with Brand Safety and Prevent Unconscious Funding of Disinformation Websites Through Advertising
Project Summary

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March 2022

This project summary aims to present the project structure and development of our series of webinars for private companies about disinformation and brand safety to other researchers and activists who might be interested in a similar enterprise. Countering disinformation is not an effort reserved for state institutions or the research community. In fact, it cannot be effective without applying a whole-of-society approach, which also means involving the private sector. This was the starting point of Prague Security Studies Institute's (PSSI) project of a series of webinars with embassies and chambers of commerce for private companies which zeroed in on the role of the private sector in countering disinformation. The aim of the project was to prevent companies from helping fund disinformation websites through advertising revenues and support non-advertising on such websites as an ethical standard of business.

PSSI teamed up with two Czech initiatives in this effort — NELEŽ (GET REAL) and Fair Advertising. The Fair Advertising initiative[1] provides monitoring and the impetus for action for the private sector – it warns companies when their advertising appears on websites with problematic content. The NELEŽ initiative[2] connects companies that have publicly pledged to the ethical standard of non-advertising on disinformation sites and provides brands a guide[3] on how to prevent their advertising from appearing on undesirable websites. Cooperation with such initiatives is crucial in the case of countries where the legislature does not tackle these issues, as in the Czech Republic.

We co-organized seminars with embassies and chambers of commerce for private companies associated with them. These institutions are directly connected to companies and motivated to offer them a quality educational program or to include similar seminars in already performed activities, e.g., within Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication. Cooperation with such institutions is therefore important for researchers and activists to facilitate contact with the private sector.

As for the content of the seminars, PSSI's researchers firstly provided the participants with a general overview of the Czech disinformation scene, including its business models and the role of advertising revenue within them. In the Czech Republic, readers' contributions and advertising revenues are in fact the most frequent sources of income for disinformation websites, according to PSSI's previous research which identified four categories of disinformation websites based on their business model.[4] Then, representatives of Fair Advertising demonstrated the issue with specific examples of brands unconsciously advertising on disinformation websites. Monitoring these cases is a long-term activity of this initiative, which posts these examples on its **Twitter account** and warns the individual brands about the reputational risk they are in. Last but not least, representatives of NELEŽ educated the participants on how to protect their brands and the tools they can use to block displaying their advertising on disinformation websites.[5]

The ideal target audience for this type of seminars are PR and marketing experts and advertisers who oversee brand communication in the online space. To convey the message more effectively, it is useful to have a guest lecturer from the private sector itself, e.g., from a given country's cooperating embassy, who can talk about their brand's approach to brand safety. We recommend focusing on large and well-known brands which are associated with strong PR potential and are also significant advertisers. For example, our past seminars involved representatives of Vodafone or Provident Financial.

1   Fair Advertising, **http://fairadvertising.cz/**

2   NELEŽ, **https://www.nelez.cz/en/**

3   "Návod na zablokování dezinformačních webů ", NELEŽ, **https://www.nelez.cz/cms/storage/uploads/2021/11/02/blokace_deziwebu_uid _61815ea13f7ad.pdf**

4   Jonáš Syrovátka, Julie Vinklová, Lindsay Wojtula a Alena Zikmundová, "DEZINFORMACE JAKO BYZNYS", Prague Security Studies Institute, **https:// www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8207_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf**

5   NELEŽ provides **a guide** for this process on its website for any brand that wants to protect itself.

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The basis of any similar project lies in data and research. The first dimension is complex knowledge of the local media scene and market, especially of the local disinformation scene. This includes the modus operandi of said media, the connections between, and their reach among the population. It is crucial to identify websites with problematic content where advertising placement would present a reputational risk to a brand. For example, NELEŽ provides a list of websites which it considers as disinformation outlets where advertising is not recommended. Their list is based on a complex methodology, which includes using three different mechanisms to determine harmfulness of a given medium, including the findings of a specialised military intelligence system OSINT and journalistic standards.[6] It is important to remember that these types of lists also need a guarantor present. That is why for a similar type of project, we recommend cooperation with the research community focusing on disinformation, with expertise based on long-term monitoring and scrutiny of the local (dis)information scene.

Besides mapping the types of local media based on content, knowledge of its financial models is essential. Therefore, the second dimension is the business aspect of disinformation media. Like all media, websites spreading disinformation and manipulative content require funding to keep up their operation. According to PSSI's previous research, by renting advertising space, these websites can accumulate up to 190 000 CZK per month. This number is an estimate consulted with advertising experts and concerns Czech websites on the list of platforms with problematic content created by the Slovak organisation Konspiratori.sk,[7] and the majority of this sum goes to the top-10 most visited websites.[8] Spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories online can therefore be a financially rewarding business in the Czech Republic. A similar type of research is recommended to map the local aspects of disinformation as business which later helps to provide concrete data and a clear picture to the target audience.

After this data is acquired, outreach activities are needed to convey the findings to the target audience – the private sector. As was mentioned, our project model included approaching embassies, chambers of commerce and other institutions connecting the private sector, such as the Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic. These institutions can help researchers to approach private companies and provide the organisational basis for the educational activities. Thanks to this model, we were able to approach over 130 representatives of the private sector including international corporations such as Honeywell, T-Mobile, and DHL Express.

Such seminars should strive to convey the full picture of the issue of disinformation and brand safety, as well as educate private companies about all the previously mentioned dimensions. Media literacy is another long-term strategy for countering disinformation and should be brought up. This includes introduction of the local disinformation scene in general but also outlining to participants how to tell apart serious and potentially toxic media themselves. The second step is explaining the business model of these websites and how much advertising contributes to their continued activity.

The potential consequences for a brand, meaning the reputational risks of letting people associate a brand with such websites, need emphasis — especially in today's world where consumers pay more and more attention to social responsibility of brands they support. Non-advertising on disinformation sites should be promoted as a standard of ethical business. It is also important to include sufficient space for questions and discussions in these seminars. Encourage the brand representatives to engage in a constructive discussion and to share their experience, e.g. whether their

6   NELEŽ, **https://www.nelez.cz/en/**

7   "List of websites with controversial content", konšpirátori.sk, **https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en**

8   Jonáš Syrovátka, Alena Zikmundová, Šimon Pinkas, Vanessa Maderová, " BUSINESS OF DISINFORMATION: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES AND WAY FORWARD", Prague Security Studies Institute, **https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8449_pssi-stakeholder-perspectives-en.pdf**

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brand is aware of this issue and how the brand tackles it.

Lastly, practical tools are needed to put all the amassed knowledge into action. This means that companies interested in this issue and dedicated to preventing supporting disinformation websites need to know what to do in practice to achieve this goal. Here, knowledge of the local legislature plays a role. In the Czech Republic, there is no legislature tackling this issue, that is why multiple civil initiatives are active in this field. This is the case of NELEŽ and Fair Advertising, and there are many others around the world that can serve as an inspiration — Sleeping Giants in the US,[9] Stop Funding Hate in the UK,[10] or more locally,

Konšpirátori in Slovakia.[11] We recommend teaming up with local initiatives who can provide support and guidance to companies who want to protect their brand, and to involve representatives of these initiatives in the educational activities.

Do not hesitate to contact PSSI, NELEŽ, or Fair Advertising if you want to learn more about how disinformation damages business and what can be done about it. In case of further interest in the matter, as part of this project we also published a blog post summarising the approach of the Czech private sector to the issue of disinformation and safety, based on the experience of the three involved organisations and their educational activities.

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9   Sleeping Giants, Twitter, **https://twitter.com/slpng_giants?lang=en**

10   Stop Funding Hate, **https://stopfundinghate.info/**

11   Konšpirátori.sk, **https://konspiratori.sk/**

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This project was supported by
the Open Information Partnership.