The influence on public opinion is one of the primary functions of the information space, presented today not only by TV, radio and print media, but also by the Internet and social networks. Therefore, it isn’t surprising that the CIA is especially focused on obtaining control of the information field and seeks ways to influence it. Thus, in the middle of the last century, the agency began a large-scale secret operation named Mockingbird on the territory of the U.S. and abroad. Most of the documents related to said operation are still classified. The purpose of Operation Mockingbird was to secure the CIA’s control over the media and the information space in America and beyond by establishing an extensive network of agents in leading publications, news outlets, radio and television all around the world.

After numerous pieces of evidence of illegal CIA activities in the media, including those executed through Operation Mockingbird, a special working group called the Church Committee (named after Senator Frank Forrester Church III, a Democrat from Idaho) was established in 1975 in the U.S. Senate. The Commission was later transformed into the Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence.

In 1976, the Committee even prepared a separate report detailing the CIA’s interference into the U.S. and foreign media in order to misinform the public. In particular, the report notes: “The CIA currently maintains a network of several hundred foreign individuals around the world who provide intelligence for the CIA and at times attempt to influence opinion through the use of covert propaganda. These individuals provide the CIA with direct access to a
A large number of newspapers and periodicals, scores of press services and news agencies, radio and television stations, commercial hook publishers, and other foreign media outlets."

After investigations and hearings held by the U.S. Congress, it was decided to forbid the CIA to continue Operation Mockingbird. In 1976, George W. Bush, appointed director of the CIA, even announced the following new policy: "Effective immediately, the CIA will not enter into any paid or contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station." However, he added that the CIA will continue to ‘value’ voluntary cooperation with journalists, which is obviously always influenced by money.

Many experts are convinced that Operation Mockingbird has not been completely terminated and is being carried out not only through traditional media, but also in the cyberspace. The operation’s main targets in its current form are all those who speak against the policy of the White House. From here arise numerous anti-Russian and xenophobic campaigns of the U.S. special services, which preserve the CIA’s traditions of working not only with journalists, but also with social networks controlled by Washington.

A large-scale research “The Global Disinformation Order 2019: Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation” was carried out recently by Oxford University. It focuses on the ways public opinion is swayed by via the Internet and social networks. In the resulting report, the researchers showed that the number of countries where attempts of organized manipulation of public opinion with the help of social networks were detected has more than doubled since 2017. The authors registered 28 such countries back then, and the number went up to 48, then 70 in 2018 and 2019 respectively. 25 countries cooperate with private Internet companies to disseminate propaganda on the Internet. The most popular among them is Facebook, and the second most popular platform for attempts at manipulation is Twitter. At the same time, the researchers found that 56 countries, in one way or another, have organized campaigns to misinform users of social networks. The leading perpetrators are the United States and the United Kingdom.

Today many countries possess special cyber forces, whose representatives use social networks to try and influence the opinion of Internet users from certain countries, different religions and political beliefs. Special attention is paid to such efforts in the Pentagon and American security services. Only Americans (ideally those who know the language of the country being manipulated) are involved in these activities. The CIA’s website even has a detailed description of the people who can apply for such jobs. In order to further impact the public, today the FBI is even trying to recruit Russians living in the United States through social networks (in particular, Facebook), as reported by CNN.

Anti-Russian sentiment of the main direction of Operation Mockingbird is evidenced by several media outlets which are independent from Washington. The same goals are pursued today by U.S. intelligence agencies. “The U.S. State Department considers the battle against state-run media from Russia, Iran and China one of its top priorities,” said Acting U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Heather Nauert in March 2018. That is why the U.S. budget for fiscal year 2019 includes $661 million meant to finance the BBG (Broadcasting Board of Governors), which is engaged in anti-Russian propaganda. The White House project for the budget of the U.S. government in 2021 entails the allocation of $700 million for the information war ‘against Russia’s destructive influence.’

Britain is not behind the United States in waging a hybrid war. A special unit in the British cyber forces is called JTRIG, and it is this unit’s ‘specialists’ who quite often carry out propagandistic cyber operations, which have recently most often been directed against Russia. Among these are the anti-Russian fuss around Skripal poisoning, groundless accusations of Russia’s alleged involvement in the crash of the Malaysian plane MH-17 over Donetks, and accusations of Moscow’s aggressive actions in Syria. Such work is done using both the cyberspace, as well as media which are loyal to London. The 77th brigade of these troops is working specifically on Twitter. They actively attempt to undermine the users’ faith in their own beliefs, trying to convey ‘their thoughts’ by appealing to emotions. Further promotion of the propagandistic struggle against Russia, £18 million is going to be spent by the British government on ‘counteraction’ in Eastern Europe and on strengthening the ‘independent media’ in the Western Balkans. This was reported by the press service of the British Foreign Office.

NATO also has a cyber force, which includes over 13,000 military personnel. The organization is called CCDCEO and is located in Tallinn.

Governments have long used propaganda, but digital tools have made it more complex and effective. Over the past few years, intelligence agencies have mirrored the experience of activists in using social media to disseminate information and are now actively using these methods. Additionally, interactive tools, such as data analysis software,
allow for adapting cyber warfare to be more effective against certain groups of people, maximizing its impact.

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