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Post, Share, Like: The Role of Facebook in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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POST, SHARE, LIKE:
THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

By

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is being used by both Russia and Ukraine as a tool of war, for very different purposes. This demonstrates that the platform no longer serves the sole function of connecting communities together. Existing literature has recognized that social media is being used in the current Russo-Ukrainian war but has yet to conduct comparative and contrastive analyses of Russian and Ukrainian social media strategies and effects. Conducting these analyses will illustrate not only what strategies are being used, but how they can be simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous for belligerents. By focusing on one platform, Facebook, one can not only learn why it is of crucial importance to both countries, but how the platform might be used moving forward. The findings of this paper suggest that Russian and Ukrainian tactics on Facebook are similar in at least six ways, but on the whole, they differ more than they coincide. The six coinciding tactics include funding, documentation on the ground, narrative spreading, heightening morale, name-calling, and utilization of the platform by leaders. Additionally, the effect of any given strategy varies, with some being successful, and others unsuccessful. Ultimately, these findings can serve as a resource for the national security, social media, political, legal, and academic communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

THESIS AND MAIN ARGUMENT

Unlike the 2014 invasion of Crimea, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine was much greater in scale, strength, and deadliness. The "little green men" (unmarked Russian soldiers) that were sent into both Crimea and Ukraine, was the physical indication that the Russo-Ukrainian War was being waged. However, long before that same physical indication appeared in 2022, war was being waged on a different platform: Facebook. The harsh reality is that Facebook was and is still being used as a tool of war by Russia. Conversely, it is now being used to prop up Ukrainian voices and aid in the resistance.

This thesis will explore the following research question: *How is Facebook being used in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War?* To answer this question, two key sub-components will be explored:

1. Russia's use of Facebook since the start of the 2022 Ukraine invasion
2. Ukraine's use of Facebook since the start of the 2022 Ukraine invasion

TOPIC SIGNIFICANCE

This topic is of increasing interest because social media is rapidly growing in usage across the world. The purpose of social media has also changed, shifting from a platform solely connecting communities together, to a tool of war. It is thus important to understand how social media is used in this new way, to achieve wartime goals. The Russo-Ukrainian war was chosen as the focus of this paper because it is the deadliest and most destabilizing interstate conflict at present. Facebook is of particular interest because this platform is a major means of communication between parties involved in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Through a comparative analysis of the role that Facebook has played for both Russia and Ukraine, one can better understand how their strategies, effects, and responses differ. By understanding this, one can not only learn about why it is of crucial importance to them, but how the platform might be used moving forward. Finally, understanding Facebook's response shines light on the development of responsibility on behalf of social media platforms, and what can be done to mitigate disinformation. Exploring each of these research questions in detail will improve and guide the knowledge and decision-making of those not only working in the national security and intelligence fields, but those in social media, academia, and the general population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I.   Russia's use of Facebook since the start of the 2022 Ukraine invasion

Paul and Matthews (2016), in their publication titled *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*, identify four features unique to Russia's social media use leading up to the current invasion. The first feature is that it is <u>high-volume and multichannel</u>, allowing for propaganda to consume viewers' attention, drown out opposing views, and increase the perceived credibility of messages.[i] The second feature is that it is <u>rapid, continuous, and repetitive</u>, allowing for propaganda to reach the viewers first, and be seen multiple times which increases the likelihood of acceptance.[ii] The third feature is that it makes <u>no commitment to objective reality</u>, meaning it is often false, but backed up with evidence that makes it appear true.[iii] This strategy is particularly successful because individuals often have difficulty discerning truths from falsehoods, and the sheer amount of information is overwhelming.[iv] The fourth feature is that it is <u>not committed to consistency,</u> meaning different messages are spread on different platforms about the same event.[v] They add that this inconsistency is often overlooked or offset due to the influence of other sources or factors.[vi]

The way in which Russian disinformation is spread through social media, according to Michalowska-Kubś (2022), can be traced back to finances. She argues that since the start of the ongoing invasion, Russia has tripled its mass media budget to over 1.6 billion dollars with half of that budget going towards state media outlets to encourage support for the regime and the war, and the other half going towards external use such as social media operations.[vii] She posits that the state's funding towards internal media is crucial in mobilizing the population in support of Vladimir Putin, and its funding towards external media operations is crucial in "dismissing, distorting, distracting, and dismaying".[viii]Citing the fact that TV is the primary news source for 73% of Russians and much of the world uses social media, she concludes that without this funding the world would have much easier access to real information about Russia's actions in Ukraine.[ix]

Priest, Dana, et al (2016), identifies the intentional spread of specific narratives (name-caling) as another tactic utilized by Russia. Some examples they use are Ukraine being called an "Islamic State safe haven," "hotbed for Chechen terrorists," and "led by Nazis"[x]. Rybak (2021) adds onto this perspective by examining a few major narratives due to their deep-rooted meanings and impacts. The first narrative he discusses, is "Crimea is Russian, Ukraine should forget about it."[xi] He argues that this narrative creates a false reality whereby the annexed Crimean Peninsula was always a part of Russia, which it was not. It also gives the illusion that separation from Ukraine greatly improved the lives of those living in the peninsula, which is not statistically accurate.[xii] The second narrative he discusses, is "Ukraine and NATO might attack Crimea".[xiii] He argues that this narrative exemplifies the false alarms that were used to justify Russia's actions in Ukraine. The third narrative he discusses, is "Ukraine has taken water away from Crimeans."[xiv] He argues this narrative frames Ukraine as an aggressor that is denying

Crimeans basic living necessities, when in reality, Ukraine had simply privatized the water supply.[xv]

Sherman (2022) notes how Russia is now utilizing technology to restrict certain social media platforms within its borders, with Facebook being one of those targets because it has banned Russian state media ads and is refusing to censor certain posts that Russia does not want publicized. He claims that the state does this by slowing down internet access to certain sites, blocking them, and threatening citizens if they are found utilizing them.[xvi] Adding however, that despite these efforts, approximately 38.9% of Russian's are still utilizing a Facebook account[xvii] but the number of users has dropped by two million since the start of the invasion.[xviii] Oremus (2022) believes that blocking and slowing down access to Facebook is thus seen as more of a symbolic act by threatening social media companies that they too will lose an entire user base if they do not cave to Russia's censorship demands.[xix]

Chúláin (2022) explores the role that Roskomnadzor, the Russian federal watchdog agency, has taken in monitoring both state media and non-state media platforms.[xx] Two of the state media platforms, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, are growing in popularity within Russia, not only for economic reasons, but for safety reasons.[xxi] In fact, in terms of monthly publications, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki are more popular than Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok combined, hailing in over 556,000 posts per month.[xxii] Chúláin (2022) concludes that Roskomnadzor and these alternative platforms are establishing a "digital iron curtain," that is cutting off the Russian population from real information.[xxiii]

Morris, Loveday, and Oremus (2022) focus on Russia's particular interest in targeting refugees since the start of the 2022 Ukraine invasion.[xxiv] They argue that with over 7.8 million Ukrainian refugees since February of 2022, propogandists are attempting to sow division and

fear in countries where these refugees might be accepted.[xxv] Ukrainian refugees committing arson, graffiti attacks, terrorist attacks, and having monkeypox, are just a few of the narratives that are being spread.[xxvi] As they discuss the impacts of these anti-refugee narratives, it is clear that they are not falling on deaf ears. In Germany, support for taking in Ukrainian refugees fell from 86% in March 2022, to 74% in September 2022.[xxvii] The leader of one of Germany's right-wing parties, Christian Democrats, accused the refugees of taking advantage of the welfare system.[xxviii] While platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Change.org, are assisting in the spread of propoganda, Facebook is on the list as well.[xxix] Some evidence the authors use to demonstrate the effects of Russian propaganda are weekly street demonstrations, attacks on refugees, and discussions on Facebook in Germany and Poland.[xxx]

Based on an initial literature review, Russia's use of Facebook during the 2022 Ukraine invasion has distinct features, is enabled by state funding, and intentionally spreads specific narratives. This includes the utilization of technology to block the site, the development of alternative social media platforms to replace it, and a targeted anti-refugee sentiment. Its effects are widespread, changing views around the world in favor of disinformation, suppressing Ukrainian voices, and controlling what information enters and leaves the war zone.

II.   Ukraine's use of Facebook since the start of the 2022 Ukraine invasion

Specia (2022) argues that Facebook is being used as a tool to stir up resistance both in and outside of Ukraine. She identifies a pattern of visceral, detailed, and often horrific social media posts that influence global condemnation and resistance. Some examples cited are a picture of baby strollers in Lviv to represent the children killed in the war, and a video of a cellist performing behind the backdrop of a blown-up building, which portray Ukraine as the survivor and Russia as the aggressor.[xxxi] She adds that they provide an extra layer of motivation for the

Ukrainian army that they are fighting for an indispensable cause, with innocent lives being taken daily.[xxxii] Maryna Yaroshevych, head of advocacy for Promote Ukraine, states "They are opening the hearts of Europeans and people around the world."[xxxiii] Many argue that the stronger the resistance, the harder it is going to be for Russia to win the war, and these social media posts contribute to that resistance.

Adams (2022) identifies another tactic used by Ukraine, which is the targeting of Russian audiences with photos, videos, and memes depicting what is truly taking place. He recognizes that this task is increasingly difficult because of the media censorship taking place in Russia, but that some of it is still penetrating the barriers. Some examples he references are regular updates on Russian military losses, war crimes being committed, and criticisms of the Russian government, which are sowing doubt and fear in those who see the posts.[xxxiv] This is made possible by Ukrainian volunteers who provide the Ukraine Defense Ministry with content at impressive speeds.[xxxv] He concludes that if it were not for the explicit targeting of Russian audiences with this emotional content, there would not be nearly as many Russian anti-war activists on social media, and not as much opposition within Russia.[xxxvi]

Suciu (2022) explores how Ukraine is documenting the war from almost every angle. He claims that this not only preserves evidence that could potentially be used for future war-crime prosecutions, but it counters Russian disinformation that often leaves out these horrors.[xxxvii] Some documentation that he refers to are photos, videos, interviews, and narratives, whereby Ukraine is emphasizing the impact that the war has had on civilians, infrastructure, and the military.[xxxviii] He adds that real-time documentation has allowed for the world to see Russian soldiers committing atrocities at a rapid pace, and stories have also been shared about the experiences that Ukrainian individuals and families have undergone as they have watched their

livelihoods disappear in front of their own eyes.[xxxix] One is the story of a little girl who sang Disney songs in a bomb shelter.[xl] He concludes that storytelling in this way puts real names, faces, and narratives to the overwhelming numbers.

TOPIC RELEVANCE AND METHODOLOGY

There are multiple reasons why this specifically tailored research topic was chosen. First, existing literature tends to leap from discussing Russian social media tactics, to how the world has responded, leaving a huge gap regarding the effects that these tactics have on the Ukrainian population. Without understanding the effects, it is much more difficult to implement measures to alleviate the effects and prevent them from happening in the first place. Second, existing literature does not comprehensively compare and contrast the way in which social media is being used by both Russia and Ukraine. This means that one is not fully understanding how each of the parties are responding to each other and using social media to their advantage. Third, existing literature does not solely focus on one social media platform like Facebook. Facebook was chosen for this research because it is the most popular social media platform shared among Russians, Ukrainians, and the rest of the world. Additionally, understanding how Facebook is responding will provide information on how its response is impacting both parties' ability to use the platform in ways they want. Finally, because the 2022 Ukraine invasion is still underway, this research focuses on how Russia and Ukraine are utilizing Facebook since the start of the most recent invasion. This analysis can thus be utilized by the national security and intelligence arms of every current Russian adversary.

This thesis will differ from existing literature in two major ways. First, it will compare and contrast the use of Facebook by both Russia and Ukraine, rather than analyzing the two independent of each other. Second, it will thoroughly explore just one social media platform,

Facebook, rather than briefly touching on multiple social media platforms. The research question will be answered by doing a comparative analysis using a case study methodology. This method best fits the research question because Russia and Ukraine are both using Facebook in the ongoing invasion, meaning there will be similarities and differences in their strategies and effects.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

FUNDING

Within one day of the start of the 2022 invasion, the Ukrainian government began a social media campaign with the release of a sign-of-life video by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.[xli] The video not only proved that he was alive, but that he would not flee, and his country would fight back.[xlii] Ever since, there has been a constant stream of posts from official government accounts. This is in part due to the launching of United24 Media in July of 2022, which is the official mouthpiece of the government aimed at promoting Ukrainian culture and countering Russian disinformation.[xliii] United24 Media is run by the Ministry of Transformation of Ukraine alongside numerous other national and international partners.[xliv] Government funds are put towards supporting United24 Media, and charitable donations received through this project are put towards three areas: Defense and Demining, Humanitarian and Medical Aid, and Rebuild Ukraine.[xlv]

Prior to the invasion, Russian funding towards its information agency, Rossiya Segodnia, and its state-media outlets, significantly grew.[xlvi] In 2021 they spent over 1.5 billion dollars on mass media, and at the beginning of 2022 they spent three times as much as they had spent in the same period the previous year.[xlvii] This massive amount of funding allows the government to produce and monitor content that conveys its desired narrative.[xlviii] Shaping internal and external opinions by blocking certain content and mandating certain stories, are a top priority of the Russian government evidenced by the sheer amount of money it is spending in this one area.

DOCUMENTATION ON THE GROUND

Real-time videos and images of the war are being posted on Facebook not just by the Ukrainian government, but by citizens on the ground, pro-Ukrainian activists, anti-Russian

activists, and a variety of other sources. In fact, Dr. Lasha Tchantouridze, graduate program professor at Norwich University explains that, "support for Ukraine has come from rather unexpected circles, a very significant contribution has been made by the Russian opposition groups and activists, some of them active in Russia, others operating from outside the country."[xlix] This support has come in the form of highlighting Ukrainian successes, Russian losses, and even horrors such as war crimes.[l] Graphic content showing the impact of Russia's actions on civilians, infrastructure, and the military serve numerous purposes.[li] First, it preserves evidence for future investigations and war crime prosecutions. Second, it counters the disinformation being spread by the Russian government and some pro-Russian activists.[lii] Finally, it rallies domestic and foreign support for the Ukrainian cause which allows the country to continue fighting back.[liii]

The Center for Civil Liberties, a Ukrainian human rights group, received a Nobel Peace Prize for documenting war crimes since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014.[liv] In 2022, it mobilized and trained a group of 200 individuals to document possible war crimes including the shelling of residential neighborhoods, rapes, attacks on hospitals, tortures, killings, and forced relocations.[lv] While this is just one group that has committed to documenting the war and posting its findings, many other groups and civilians have committed to doing the same.

This documentation is already proving to be successful, especially in terms of countering disinformation and rallying support. A Kyiv entrepreneur who manages teams of social media volunteers describes the country as "winning the war of memes."[lvi] Her teams react to news as it comes out and produce creative videos set to widely known music.[lvii] When Britain supplied anti-tank weapons, a thank-you video was created with the weapons in action set to music by Gustav Holst and The Clash featuring Shakespeare, David Bowe, and Lewis Hamilton.[lviii]

Similarly, when Sweden invested in Ukrainian rocket launchers, the team created a video thanking Sweden for its "value-for-money" investment, set to the tune of Abba's "Money, Money, Money."[lix] These videos document what's actually happening on the ground, while also rallying and thanking those who support them.

Russia is also documenting the war, but in a way that furthers its desired narrative. As the 2022 invasion began, Russian state media immediately disseminated Vladimir Putin's justifications for the war across as many platforms as possible: *necessary, denazification, anti-genocide.*[lx] A flood of edited videos and out-of-context photos followed, many of which were from previous years and entirely different conflicts.[lxi] An influence operation was disrupted involving 40 Russian Facebook accounts posing as independent news outlets in Kyiv.[lxii] These accounts reported that the West was betraying Ukraine, Ukraine was a failed state, and Ukrainian soldiers were surrendering to Russia.[lxiii]

Both countries utilize Facebook to document the war on the ground. Ukraine does so to preserve evidence, counter disinformation, and rally support. Russia does so to further its narrative by manipulating images and videos and spreading false justifications for its actions.

NARRATIVE SPREADING

The narrative evidenced in Volodymyr Zelenskyy's sign-of-life video at the beginning of the invasion was clear: Ukrainian officials will not flee, Ukraine will not surrender, and the Russian invasion is unjustified. This video served multiple purposes, one of which was to respond to Russian disinformation that claimed that the president had fled Kyiv.[lxiv] As the war raged on, the country has continued to respond to Russian disinformation, solidify its stance on the war, and condemn the Russian government. An example of this was a cartoon that depicted Adolf Hitler looking down at Vladimir Putin and caressing his face.[lxv] By inuendo, the cartoon associated the

Russian president with one of the world's most hated and evil individuals.[lxvi] Narratives like this are spread to remind the world of what is taking place and target Russian audiences who might be unaware of the reality.

Through trial and error, Ukraine learned which narratives worked and which ones didn't. When Ukraine initially displayed images of dead Russian bodies, it realized it mobilized Russians against them even more.[lxvii] Instead, it targeted specific Russian regions by learning the regions' strengths and weaknesses.[lxviii] Through the targeting, one narrative is consistent as the country counters disinformation and furthers its cause: "Ukraine is an honest nation and an honest people trying to tell the truth."[lxix]

For Russia, narrative spreading is one of the most frequently used and relied upon tools of war. This is because distorting reality both at home and abroad allows Russia to pursue its illegal actions in Ukraine without as much pushback as they otherwise would receive. Russia began the 2022 invasion with multiple narratives: "demilitarization," "denazification," and "anti-genocide."[lxx] As the invasion continued, Russia strictly monitored domestic narratives by banning the use of the word "war", banning access to Facebook, and shutting down the last remaining independent radio station.[lxxi] Russian citizens are still regularly told that a targeted operation is taking place, but only against Nazis and the military.[lxxii] These narratives are working domestically, despite ample evidence that Ukrainian cities are being bombed and Ukrainian citizens are being killed.

Internationally, Russia strategically targets certain regions with narratives in order to gain more support and sow distrust towards Ukraine and the West. A prime example of this was over 150,000 posts within the first two weeks of the invasion claiming that Ukraine and the West are racist.[lxxiii] These posts cited the fact that Africans were not allowed to escape from certain areas

and were not assisted during wars in Libya and Afghanistan.[lxxiv] Collectively, the posts targeted African populations and were subsequently reposted and spread throughout Africa as truths.[lxxv]

Aside from targeting specific audiences, Russia regularly distributes deepfakes, uses fake accounts, forges documents, and forges videos.[lxxvi] The narratives spread through these tactics are not consistent and serve as a way to muddle information and make people doubt reality. Some examples include creating a fake video of the Ukrainian president urging his soldiers to surrender, posing as the BBC and Al Jazeera, and hacking into Ukrainian Facebook accounts to post false information.[lxxvii]

Narrative spreading is used by both Ukraine and Russia on Facebook. Ukraine does this to target certain audiences, counter disinformation, and garner more support. Russia also does this to target certain audiences, but is primarily focused on perpetrating false information, confusing people, and turning people against Ukraine and the West.

HEIGHTENING MORALE

Scenes such as Ukrainians helping feed Russian soldiers, violinists playing music in destroyed streets, and young children wounded by shelling, are motivating resistance through an emotional appeal.[lxxviii] Foreign fighters have put their lives on pause to travel to Ukraine and help fight; they are inspired by Ukraine's resilience and repulsed by the damage that Russia is causing.[lxxix] The Ukrainian military has also continued to fight, and its manpower is only growing, in part due to propaganda. It's important to note that Russia is not the only actor that misappropriates images, videos, and information for its own gain. One notable instance of this was a video that went viral portraying a Ukrainian pilot, named the "Ghost of Kyiv," shooting down six Russian planes.[lxxx] This supposed pilot became a hero for many including the former Ukrainian president who reposted the false video.[lxxxi] Another instance was a story that claimed

that Ukrainian soldiers were killed by Russians for not surrendering, when in reality they had surrendered and been taken prisoner.[lxxxii] These posts serve as a way to heighten morale not just for the Ukrainian military, but for the entire world. However, some of them are fabricated.

Russia blocked Facebook due to the risk it posed in terms of keeping morale up within the country.[lxxxiii] If citizens saw the true horrors in Ukraine and condemnations coming from across the world, it would threaten the control the government has over its population. Despite blocking the application, the government continues to utilize it to heighten morale for pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian movements.[lxxxiv] It does this by publishing disinformation on accounts, reporting anti-Russian accounts, flooding comment sections, hacking into legitimate accounts to spread false narratives, and more.[lxxxv]

Ukraine and Russia both use Facebook to heighten morale such that domestic and international support, condemnation towards the opposing side, and motivation can be garnered. Both countries have attempted to heighten morale through the use of fabricated stories, images, and videos.

NAME CALLING

There is not documentation of widespread name calling on behalf of Ukrainians, but during an interview with a group of Ukrainian writers at the 29th Annual Lviv Book Forum, they referenced a sentiment change that took place as a result of the war.[lxxxvi] One of the writers, Emma Graham-Harrison, states that some Ukrainians are now using the word "non-humans" when referring to Russians.[lxxxvii] While she's concerned about a collective negative attitude towards Russians, she understands why Ukrainians are upset at Russians for not speaking up; the situation is non-negotiable.[lxxxviii] Peter Pomerantsev adds that during any war, the attacked often hate the attackers, and this is a war that stems back to Russian cultures and social attitudes.[lxxxix]

There is endless documentation of name calling on behalf of both Russians and the Russian government. Since the start of the 2022 invasion, Vladimir Putin accused Ukrainians of being banderites, neo-nazis, fascists, and genocidal.[xc] These words have been repeated across Facebook to justify Russia's actions, dehumanize Ukraine and its people, and increase support for Russia.

UTILIZATION OF THE PLATFORM BY LEADERS

The notorious "sign-of-life" video that characterized the start of the invasion, was just the beginning of the utilization of Facebook on a regular basis by Ukrainian leaders, specifically Volodymyr Zelenskyy.[xci] It is used to give updates on the war, combat disinformation, rally support, thank allies, and more. Russia has taken advantage of this utilization by Ukrainian leaders in the form of deepfakes. One deepfake that spread like wildfire across the platform, showed Zelenskyy urging his people to surrender.[xcii] By the time Facebook was able to take it down, Ukraine already had to combat the effects of the deepfake in order to prevent panic and confusion.[xciii]

While Facebook is blocked in Russia for the general population, high-ranking military officials and some individuals associated with the Kremlin, still use the platform to recruit fighters across the world. Job ads looking to hire combat fighters, medics, drone operators, and psychologists, reach hundreds of thousands of people in dozens of languages.[xciv] An example of one of the post's, written in French, reads: *Join us now to defend Russia's honor and multipolar world.*[xcv] Some of these posts have been traced back to the Wagner group, a Russian paramilitary group, and the Russian Intelligence Service.[xcvi] One agency in particular founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Internet Research Agency, is known for employing thousands of paid internet trolls to recruit fighters and spread disinformation.[xcvii] Many have remained published because the platform has been unable to identify its source.[xcviii]

Leaders and military officials from both Russia and Ukraine, utilize Facebook, but for different reasons. For Ukraine, it's to prove life, combat disinformation, give updates, and rally support. For Russia, it's to recruit fighters and spread disinformation.

CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

RUSSIA

I.   High-Volume and Multi-Channel

Russian propaganda is produced in large volumes and disseminated across many platforms in the form of text, videos, images, and audio recordings.[xcix] On Facebook, Russian internet trolls operate hundreds of accounts and are expected to meet a daily quota of 135 posts with at least 200 characters each.[c] This tactic is important because the more sources that are distributing the same message, the more persuasive and reliable that message is deemed to be.[ci] Additionally, when ones Facebook feed is flooded with Russian propaganda, competing messages are drowned out, increasing the chances that an individual is actually going to read the message and believe it.[cii]

II.   Federal Watchdog Agency

Roskomnadzor is the Russian federal watchdog agency that monitors social media platforms and broadcasting channels to detect dissent and punish "illegal" online activity.[ciii] This agency is responsible for blocking applications such as Facebook, which they found guilty of "extremist" activity due to urges of violence against Vladimir Putin and Russian soldiers that were found on the platform.[civ] Roskomnadzor sends a clear message: the government is watching, and any sign of dissent will be harshly punished. This tactic helps Russia create the narrative it desires surrounding the war in Ukraine and ensures that the citizenry (and social media platforms) obey governmental orders no matter where they are.[cv]

III.   Widespread Disinformation

Russian propaganda is often false but contain subtle signs of truth that reel viewers in.[cvi] Entire events are manufactured, but names and photos of cities might be accurate.[cvii] A photo that

is real might be edited and distorted to convey a particular message.[cviii] Actors are hired to pretend that an atrocity is taking place against Russians in Ukraine. Real news channels such as the BBC and Al Jazeera are dubbed or duplicated by propogandists and used to Russia's advantage.[cix] Familiar messages and narratives are spread repetitively to seem more credible and true.[cx] All of these examples fall under the umbrella of disinformation tactics that Russia uses on Facebook in support of its cause.

IV.   Alternative Social Media Platforms

Due to the blocking of platforms such as Facebook, Russians are turning to state-owned social media platforms such as Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki.[cxi] These platforms were created by Russia as alternatives that not only abide by governmental orders and laws but keep domestic knowledge and narratives under strict control. Many are turning to these alternatives because they have no other social media option, but experts remain weary because it is much more difficult for young audiences to earn income and be entertained on state-owned platforms.[cxii] As of October of 2022, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki were the most used platforms in Russia in terms of monthly publications, with fifty-five times as many posts as Facebook.[cxiii] This is a tactic that furthers Russia's efforts to distort reality, keep its citizenry on a short leash, and show social media companies that the country will continue on without them.

V.   Threats to Facebook

Because Facebook has taken measures against Russia such as removing disinformation and banning state-owned platforms, Russia has retaliated.[cxiv] It has accused Facebook of "Russophobia" and "allowing hate speech regarding Russians and Russian soldiers."[cxv] As a result, Russia has repeatedly threatened Facebook that if they did not lift restrictions and abide by censorship demands, access would be completely stripped in Russia.[cxvi] This tactic is

symbolic in that it shows other social media platforms that if any actions are taken against Russia, the platform's user base and income will decline.

VI.   Targeted Anti-Refugee Sentiment

As of March of 2022, 3.5 million people fled Ukraine to neighboring countries, worsening the already existing humanitarian crisis in Europe.[cxvii] Similar to how Russia used the refugee situation during the Syrian crisis to its advantage, it is attempting to do the same with Ukraine: inflame right wing extremist, anti-immigration sentiments.[cxviii] Previous EU immigration policies made it such that no one could enter the EU long-term unless they were covered under a web of disjointed agreements, visa waivers, or citizenship statuses.[cxix] Russia is specifically targeting countries such as Poland, to sow distrust and disdain towards Ukrainian refugees.[cxx] By labeling Poland's acceptance of refugees "white privilege" and "supporting Nazis", it is in part working.[cxxi] Support for refugees up to this point has been organized not by the government, but haphazardly by local businesses, regions, and civil society organizations.[cxxii] The targeted disinformation and fake news with regards to Ukrainian refugees, is a tactic being used by Russia to give Ukrainians no place to escape, and reduce their support.

VII.   Blockage of Facebook Access in Russia

Russia followed through on its threats to Facebook by blocking access to the platform entirely from anywhere within the country.[cxxiii] This tactic serves multiple purposes: it sends a message to social media platforms that they too are at risk if they take actions the government does not like, it strengthens the control that Russia has over the information that citizens send and receive in the country, and it allows the government to manipulate the information environment more in its favor.[cxxiv]

VIII.   Mobilize Hate and Distrust towards the Ukrainian Population

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One of the primary goals of the disinformation campaign being waged by Russia on Facebook, is to mobilize hate and distrust towards Ukraine and its population.[cxxv] Just prior to the start of the invasion, messages were focused on demoralizing Ukrainians, splintering relationships between Ukrainians and Russians, and increasing support for Russia.[cxxvi] As the war continues, some of the most common hate-speech themes claim that Ukraine is not a legitimate state, neo-Nazis have infiltrated the Ukrainian government, Russians are being killed in Ukraine, and Ukraine is training child soldiers.[cxxvii] While this tactic is meant to turn everyone against Ukraine and its people, it's clear that it is not as successful as Russia would like.[cxxviii] Ukrainians and Russians share an immense amount of culture and history, with over 11 million Russians having Ukrainian relatives, and still staying in touch with them.[cxxix] Most of the world has access to a wide variety of sources that disprove the fake news and disinformation coming out of Russia; most do not just blindly start hating an entire country and its population, based on a post they see on Facebook.

UKRAINE

I.   Debunk and Preempt Disinformation

As Russia continues to spread disinformation, Ukrainians utilize Facebook to directly counter the fake news and preempt it before it even spreads. One example is the number of injuries and casualties that the Russian military is suffering; Russia claims there are very few, Ukrainians blast images, videos, and testimonials proving there are many more.[cxxx] Another example is harm towards civilians; Russia claims the operation is just against the government and military, Ukrainians spread proof that Russia is intentionally and continuously targeting civilians.[cxxxi] Finally, when Russia posted a deepfake of Volodymyr Zelenskyy telling everyone to surrender, there was an immediate response by the Ukrainian government and population, confirming that

those statements were never made. This tactic ensures that there are competing messages to cast doubt on Russian disinformation, and that the world knows what is truly taking place on the ground.

II.   Coordinate Care and Delivery of Supplies

Civil society groups and humanitarian organizations both in and outside of Ukraine utilize Facebook to spread information about locations where medical care, basic necessities, and even military supplies, can be found.[cxxxii] Nationwide projects to amass volunteers and donors are organized by everyday citizens through their smartphones, allowing the government to focus on acquiring larger items such as drones, vehicles, and air defense systems.[cxxxiii] Food, medicine, bullets, vests, and money are coordinated strategically through Facebook groups and private messages, to ensure that the information gets to those in need rather than the Russian military.[cxxxiv] This tactic is extremely efficient and effective because it is nearly impossible for information to get around via word-of-mouth or mail. It is instant, allowing millions to be informed within seconds. One might otherwise not know that their neighbor down the street has some extra pieces of fruit, a local store is still open with bandages, or a military unit is stationed in the city amassing makeshift weapons; Facebook (and other social media platforms) fill that gap.

III.   Expose Russian Attack Strategies

When an attack occurs anywhere in the country, it is almost guaranteed that some form of evidence will be submitted to either news organizations, the Ukrainian government, or a social media platform like Facebook.[cxxxv] A few examples of this include the notorious Russian military tanks painted with the letter "Z", footage of the blown-up bridge connecting Russia to occupied Crimea, or images of the Russian convoy lined up in a traffic jam attempting to reach Kyiv. The

widespread dissemination of images and videos of attacks, expose the type of weapons Russia is using, how an attack is carried out, and even the strategies/methods that are used.[cxxxvi] This not only shows the world Russia's "playbook," but gives Ukrainians specific cues to look out for and helps the military be better prepared to respond and counter-attack.

IV.   Inspire Countries to take Action against Russia

The extensive amount of posting and sharing that has occurred on Facebook, has in part led to a united and strong response in support of Ukraine and against Russia.[cxxxvii] Images and videos of mutilated civilians in Bucha, young children severely wounded by shelling, and even the elderly stranded on destroyed roads, pull on the heart strings of many.[cxxxviii] The extent of the damage, destruction, and brutality that has occurred, rallies support for Ukraine from around the world in and of itself; Russia is unable to justify its actions no matter how much it tries.[cxxxix] This has resulted in countries continuing to supply weapons and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, vote to condemn Russia's actions, and remove Russia from international councils.[cxl] Ukraine's social media use has been so persuasive, heartbreaking, and inspiring, that foreign fighters have even dropped everything to come fight for the cause.[cxli] If it were not for all of the first-hand evidence from the frontlines, the world would not know what is actually taking place, and would not have nearly as much of an incentive to support Ukraine.

V.   Mobilize Hate and Distrust towards the Russian Population

Calls for violence against Russians and Russian soldiers, made by Ukrainians, are so numerous, that Facebook had to address it in a new hate speech policy statement.[cxlii] While calls for violence and discrimination against Russian citizens are technically not allowed, they still fall through the cracks and remain published. Ukrainians and their governmental officials have attempted to mobilize hate and distrust towards Russia on Facebook. Some of these statements

include "death to Vladimir Putin," "permanently remove Russians from Ukraine and Belarus," and other dehumanizing language regarding Russian soldiers.[cxliii] Storms of comments from Ukrainian users on a regular basis, support the concept that "hatred amongst Ukrainians against ALL Russians is growing, exploding."[cxliv] Famous Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko posted, "A country called *RF* should cease to exist…"[cxlv] Her post went viral and received comments like "Russia is to be destroyed," "completely isolated from humanity," "let the whole world see the disgusting face of all the inhabitants of Russia."[cxlvi] Some argue that these comments should be allowed due to the context of the invasion, while others argue that hate and incitement speech should be treated the same no matter who the author is or what the situation is. Regardless, this tactic serves multiple purposes: it strengthens a united resistance, makes people angry and hateful towards Russia and the Russian population, and gives Ukrainians an opportunity to vent and cope in any way that they can.

FACEBOOK'S RESPONSE

With two state actors utilizing Facebook in a variety of ways, the platform was faced with a choice: respond or not respond. Since the start of the 2022 Ukraine invasion, Facebook has engaged in extensive content moderation despite receiving backlash for moderating other content in the past, such as that against the Vietnamese and Indian governments. [cxlvii] This is in part because many world actors hold a united sentiment in regard to the role that social media platforms have in moderating Russian content throughout this uniquely online war.[cxlviii] In fact, the United States, EU, and other countries are putting pressure on platforms to stand up against Russian disinformation and propaganda.[cxlix]

Facebook in particular has taken on this role by banning Russian state-media ads, downranking Russian state-media posts, and demonetizing accounts run by the government.[cl]An example of this was when Facebook took down a large network of accounts that were impersonating European news outlets and spreading a pro-Russia view on the invasion of Ukraine.[cli] Fake journalists, researchers, and individuals were posing as members of the Guardian, Daily Mail, or Al Jazeera, and manipulate the narratives.[clii] After these actions against Russia were taken, engagement with Russian state-media accounts fell by 80%. Russia subsequently threatened Facebook, claiming that it would be banned if the censorship continued, and followed through on that threat.[cliii] Yet, Facebook did not cave.[cliv]

While Facebook is taking actions against Russia, they are also allowing numerous actions. Firstly, users can call for violence against Russians and the Russian military only in the context of the recent invasion.[clv] This includes calls for the assassination of Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko.[clvi] Secondly, users can post support for the Azov battalion, a far-right Ukrainian group, which was originally a prohibited action.[clvii] Thirdly, Facebook is continuing to

allow posts that contain disinformation, as long as they are not deemed "harmful". This means that even if Ukrainians post disinformation (which does happen), if it is not considered "harmful", it is not taken down.[clviii] The platform will sometimes give warnings to pages who are repeatedly fact-checked as false, but these warnings are rare.[clix]

Human Rights Watch takes a strong stand against Facebook's response arguing that, much of the disinformation still goes unnoticed. They reference a few key flaws in Facebook's response. First, the sheer quantity of false posts leads to a game of "whack-a-mole," whereby a lot falls through the cracks.[clx] Second, Facebook's language capacities also make it difficult to catch harmful content perpetrated by the Russian government and others[clxi]. Thirdly, Facebook has underinvested in responding to the Ukraine invasion, are inconsistent in its policies, are not transparent, and are not held accountable.[clxii] Finally, Facebook has proved that they can remove toxic content if they receive enough pressure, so they are choosing to not do so as it relates to other problematic issues such as cyberbullying and racism.[clxiii]

Facebook has taken certain actions to counter Russian disinformation and help preserve Ukraine's ability to fight for self-determination, freedom, and liberty. However, those actions have been criticized for falling short, creating a double standard, and giving rise to a wider problem in that an "open" and "free" platform has the ability to silence speech and choose sides.

CONCLUSION

There are six notable tactics that are shared amongst both Russia and Ukraine on Facebook since the commencement of the 2022 invasion. These include but are not limited to funding, documentation on the ground, narrative spreading, heightening morale, name-calling, and utilization of the platform by leaders. Even though the tactics are the same, the reasoning behind the tactic, and its effects, might differ.

Funding allows both countries to expand its reach on Facebook and have a greater impact on the online information environment. Russia focuses its funding on growing its state-media organizations to shape the desired domestic narrative and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of bots to spread disinformation across the world. Ukraine focuses its funding on the official government mouthpiece, United24Media, which gathers charitable donations and aims to inform the world about the reality of the situation on the ground (counter disinformation).

Documentation on the ground allows both countries to create its desired narratives. Russia often distorts this documentation by editing and manipulating the footage and imagery, for its personal gain. Even if a particular video or photograph is real, Russia uses it selectively to paint a picture that a piece of evidence is indicative of a widespread trend or theme. Ukraine uses the documentation for personal gain as well, typically to garner support for itself and condemnation toward Russia. It also uses the documentation to preserve evidence for future war crime prosecutions.

Narrative spreading, inherent in the name, allows both countries to spread its desired narratives. Russia wants the world to think that it is a victim, Ukraine is an aggressor, violator of human rights, and deserving of the invasion. Ukraine wants the world think similarly about

Russia, but rather than deserving of an invasion, deserving of widespread condemnation and punishment for its actions in Ukraine. The tactic of name-calling, which is also shared by both countries, has similar purposes and effects: to shape a narrative about the opponent and persuade the public to adopt that opinion or view.

Heightening morale gives not only the respective militaries, but entire populations, additional motivation to keep fighting and enduring. As casualties continue to rise and conditions on the home front get increasingly challenging, this tactic is used to spread words of encouragement, nationalist sentiments, and more. This tactic is particularly important for Ukraine as virtually no piece of its society has been left untouched, and it requires a daily uphill battle by the military and citizenry to prevent Russia from taking over. Russia uses this tactic to encourage its soldiers to keep fighting (as many are unaware of the reason they are even fighting in Ukraine) and encourage the population to support the war effort at home.

While leaders from both countries utilize the platform, the reasoning behind this is very different. Russian leaders utilize the platform primarily to recruit fighters. Ukrainian leaders on the other hand, utilize the platform to combat disinformation, prove that they are still alive, give frequent updates about what is happening on the ground, and heighten morale.

Russia and Ukraine contrast in terms of how Facebook is utilized, more so than compare. There are many reasons why this might be the case; goals, contexts, capabilities, populations, war successes, and even leadership, differ amongst the countries. Tactics unique to Russia include but are not limited to high-volume and multi-channel content, the use of a federal watchdog agency, widespread disinformation, the creation of alternative social media platforms, threats to Facebook, a targeted anti-refugee sentiment, the blockage of Facebook within Russia, and mobilizing hate/distrust towards the Ukrainian population. Tactics unique to Ukraine include

but are not limited to debunking and preempting disinformation, coordinating care and delivery of supplies, exposing Russia attack strategies, inspiring countries to take action against Russia, and mobilizing hate/distrust towards the Russian population.

While it's difficult to determine to what extent these respective tactics have been successful or unsuccessful, it's clear that Russia and Ukraine are in very different positions and the use of Facebook differs as a result. Russia's use of Facebook appears much more offensive in nature, whereas Ukraine's appears more defensive. Despite Russia's efforts to distort reality and turn popular opinion against Ukraine, Ukraine is still receiving worldwide support not just online, but in the form of weapons, humanitarian aid, and diplomacy.

Just like the newest groundbreaking rifles, tanks, or bomber jets, social media is a new and groundbreaking weapon. The 2022 Ukraine invasion put this fact on full display as both Russia and Ukraine engaged in battle not only on the ground and in the air, but on Facebook. All of the tactics, strategies, and behaviors that have been exercised on Facebook throughout the invasion, have cumulatively contributed to numerous things: the online information environment, domestic perceptions, foreign perceptions, and either positive or negative contributions to the war effort. This has serious implications for U.S national security that must be considered as this conflict continues, and future conflicts arise.

Firstly, countries have the ability to impact public perception through the use of Facebook. Text, imagery, and footage that is shared on the platform contributes to what people think about a certain conflict, which side they support, and even what actions they will take to support the side that they perceive to be in "the right." Secondly, countries can distort reality and mislead people through the use of Facebook. With just one manipulated photo or fake video, millions of people can think that a side is surrendering, an attack has occurred, or a particular individual is dead.

Thirdly, Facebook as a company has the ability to control the online information environment; whether they have an obligation to do so in a national security situation is still up for debate. Lastly, countries recognize the importance of controlling and being extremely active in the online information environment. Russia has proven that Facebook can be used for nefarious purposes by manipulating the truth, lying, hacking, and strategically targeting certain groups and individuals. Ukraine has proven that Facebook can be used for beneficial purposes by countering disinformation, informing the world of the reality, coordinating critical wartime needs, and garnering support and morale.

Ultimately, perceptions influence beliefs and actions. As a result, it's critical that the United States pays close attention to what is taking place on social media with regards to international conflicts. With the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in particular, information regarding attacks and counterattacks, recruitment, governmental stances, the coordination of care and supplies, and more, are being shared on Facebook. This is information that can be extremely helpful as the United States crafts its foreign policy, sends assistance to Ukraine, and protects itself from Russian aggression. Additionally, because Facebook is an American company, the U.S. government must consider to what extent (if at all) it needs to enforce certain restrictions or requirements on the platform due to the fact that this is an international and national security issue.

Based on these findings, further research to expand upon this work is recommended. Exploring how Russia and Ukraine are utilizing other social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, will reveal other trends in their tactics and effects, as well as the way in which those platforms are responding. Investigating how Russia and Ukraine's use of social media is evolving over time will also help understand how it might continue to evolve in the

future. This can be done by comparing the use of social media during the 2014 invasion of Crimea to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Finally, looking into how social media platforms are utilized by countries in other conflicts, might reveal trends in terms of how and when it is used as an offensive or defensive weapon, and what online information is important for national security purposes.

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