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The Methods of Disinformation in the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract: The essay is an attempt to present the methods of publishing information in traditional media and social media, including TikTok in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. Disinformation and propaganda are presented as part of the war. Attention is also paid to cyberwar, with examples drawn from a brief analysis. The first assumption is that cyberwar has specific mechanisms and it influences different groups of a society. The second assumption is the world is facing a new kind of conflict and the modern and proper education of students, communication experts and journalists is a must.

Keywords: disinformation, fake news, war, cyberwar, media, Tik-Tok.

Introduction

The year 2022 has brought to public attention a newly arising problem while slowly recovering after the damage done in society on a global scale by the outburst of the coronavirus pandemic. The threats of Putin invading Ukraine declared in late 2021 were fulfilled by the end of February the next year, as the country was raided by the Russian soldiers. For the first few weeks since the "special military operation" has started, people all over the globe have been engaged in keeping track of the latest updates on the ongoing conflict and preparing help to Ukrainian immigrants in their countries to their best capacities, the topic of war has truly become the main topic all over the media. This attentiveness, however, appeared to be dropping lately, the news is less and less commonly seen, but the conflict does not stop. Do people lose interest in spreading awareness and helping the Ukrainian immigrants in their countries? Or perhaps, the other option is, have micro-distractions from this topic been created? Are people still in the focus of ongoing action, but fail to see they have fallen into a spiral of disinformation and fake news that brought their attention to the margins of the actual issue? Where do publicly spread news on this topic attempt to lead the focus of the public eye? In the paragraphs below, the important issue

of the recently used method of spreading fake news will be discussed, based on the articles concerning the phenomenon of disinformation in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Research

To begin with, the picture of the current information spreading stream that is ongoing nowadays should be brought to attention. Comparably with the beginnings of the war, the main information seems to be less commonly updated in radio stations, TV and the internet sources. It is, however, still available on the internet for those who want to keep aware of the progress of the situation in Ukraine. In fact, on several apps of different uses the information is still spread regularly. The perfect example of such a source of information is an application commonly used by youth called TikTok. There are countless videos and live streams in public display available there. Yet we seem not to know as much as we did about the ongoing conflict. What is happening in information sources like, for example, TikTok? According to an article published in The Guardian the videos with a 'Ukraine' tag could receive up to 30 billion views within one week upon the time of an article being published. This, however, does not equal being well-informed about Russia's invasion. Research done by the NewsGuard's team proves fake news and pro-Russian propaganda to be a big component of the information posted on the video-sharing app. In fact, fake information was blended with accurate one. While checking the accuracy of the information on the app, the team has found fake news presenting for example Vladimir Putin photoshopped into footage from a press conference that took place in March or Kremlin propaganda. (Hern 2022). [1] In addition, similar information with a different set of proofs found was published on BBC News. The article expands the report given by the journalists from The Guardian with a few examples of old video clips, dating back to 2017, that were streamed live on multiple accounts, allegedly showing the current situation in Ukraine, and sometimes gaining even up to almost 30 million viewers. It also provides us with an example of a video game being used to fake actual war footage (Sardarizadeh 2022). [2] Yet another article concerning this issue brings an even new matter to consider. It describes the stream of the information exchange concerning the war on the TikTok app as a 'Cyberwar' or even a 'World Cyberwar I'. The new phenomenon is said to be fully consciously created by people, being described as a public exchange of easily accessible and spreadable information, that is, of information and disinformation. What is more, the Cyberwar does not only affect the TikTok app, in fact, it has been noticed on all the well-known video and photography sharing platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or Telegram. The more commonly used information resources include deep faked video reports of the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, or the 'combat' of information oscillating between footage

of Vladimir Putin by his desk probably used in contexts of further threats and, on the contrary, footage of the President Zelenskyy in the bombarded cities as a response presenting willingness to fight back. The article also points to the Ukrainian president's acting career and skills as emphasis of his confidence behind the camera being exploited by him in order to encourage the people to fight. (Brown 2022). [3]

To briefly sum up the information provided in the previous paragraph, we can see a few overlapping fake news and disinformation techniques being used. First of all, what is quite a usual phenomenon in such cases, we can observe a very engaged discussion about the news provided by various media, as to who is providing the audience with reliable information and who is trying to mislead people into believing the propaganda, we can easily find repeatedly shared pro-Russian propaganda and deep faked videos and footage that aim to either arouse fear in the reader or portray Ukraine as the real aggressor. Then, it appears that a relatively new tool is being used to not only disinform the target audience, but also shift their focus away from the main issue. That is the use of social media and, in particular, content sharing apps. People's attention is being drawn away from actually thinking of possible support to the engaged discussions online as to which photo is real and which is not and regularly posting videos for purposes of information spreading. This, however, is done by the people, who often are the merest app users without any professional experience in journalism and even more often exploited for the sake of them gaining the audience without any purpose connected to the shared war-related content. In the shadow of the ongoing war, a new conflict that distracts people's attention from it, has arisen, and this is the so-called Cyberwar, that came into existence thanks to the advanced level of technology that has rapidly developed over the last couple of years. This combination of tools does not only make the spreading of information and fake news easier and faster, but keeps the audience's attention limited to micro-conflicts in such places as comment sections under the shared posts and the content sharing-based conflicts from the officials themselves.

How to counter the stream of spreading fake news that is so fast, it is able to gain a total of billions of views under a single shared post on the internet, then? Most importantly, one has to educate themselves on Russian disinformation tactics. The Russian government has created very extensive propaganda against Ukraine and alleged justifications of their invasion. Since it has been spread for a very long time, a potential reader can easily be confused, then, what the truth is. Therefore, it is highly advisable to do research about the history of the development of Russian propaganda concerning Ukraine in order to detect the fake news more easily. Complementary to that, it is useful to research the information sources that are confirmed to be credible and keep track of them and tell apart the propaganda from the reliable information. Third of all, and most

importantly, in the era of technological development and times, when one single interaction with content posted online makes it appear for a bigger audience due to the algorithm, one must be very careful as to what content they share, comment on and like. An interaction with a deep faked video material, for example, will result in the same material being shown to a few more people, by whom each interaction with the post will spread it further. It is important to keep in mind that the algorithm is the exact tool that is exploited in the previously mentioned Cyberwar, since this is what passes fake news on to a bigger audience. ("Combating disinformation about the war in Ukraine — News Literacy Project" 2022). [4]

Conclusion

To conclude from all the above, the war that our world has been facing recently took a, by far, unusual form, that constitutes not only the military battles themselves, but also the cyber fight that has taken over the general social focus. It is vital to educate society, especially the youth, who are the most common category of users of online content-sharing platforms, on the techniques of spotting fake news, deep faked materials and disinformation and on how to properly react when such an information source is found. It is equally important to spread awareness about the functioning and content of war-related propaganda so that news of this kind is easier to spot. The notion of Cyberwar should also be studied further in order to understand its mechanisms and possible influence on society. The world is facing a new kind of conflict and all means of proper education are necessary.

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