

Disinformation: The Hidden Weapon of the Ukraine-Russia War

Introduction

With the technology that we have access to today, information is more easily accessible and transmittable than it has ever been before, and it only continues to become more accessible. Information in wars has always been important, and with the war between Russia and Ukraine, that continues to be true. However, the Russia-Ukraine war is arguably the most connected in terms of technology that we have ever had. The majority of people in either Russia or Ukraine have access to technology like a smartphone. An article from the CBC (2022) labels this war as "the smartphone war," emphasizing the importance of access to information and News that people have. Through smartphones, social media, and traditional news media, we can access a constant stream of images, videos, and stories about the ongoing Invasion. People are overwhelmed with information.

One of the consequences of information being more accessible is that disinformation is also more accessible. Disinformation is information that is purposely created or distributed with malicious intent. It has the goal or purpose of trying to mislead, confuse, or create some type of false or harmful narrative. "Lies breed confusion and contribute to the 'decay of truth' and to a clash of narratives" (European Parliament, *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*, pg. 8). It is used to control populations and the way people think. It can shape people's reality. In the lead-up to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, we saw

tremendous amounts of disinformation being released by the Russian Government and State Media. Their goal was to portray themselves as the good guys and make Ukraine look like the true aggressors.

The guiding question that I will be examining in this essay is, what are the effects of disinformation on society? I want to look at and understand Russia's motivations for creating and distributing disinformation and how it affects their population and the Ukrainian population and the rest of the international community. The reason for my interest in examining disinformation is how much it can shape society's views. I believe that disinformation is an extremely dangerous tool that, if not confronted or dealt with then, the consequences can be dire. Two particular pieces of Russian disinformation will be examined later, along with one piece of disinformation that Ukraine has released. To round out this paper, we will take a look at the societal implications of disinformation and how the sociological concept of the sociological imagination can be applied.

Russian Disinformation

Genocide of Donbas

Russia is the primary distributor of disinformation during this war. Putin is trying to portray his actions as being powered by altruistic motives. This is reflected in the first piece of disinformation that we are examining. On February 23rd, 2022, during a televised speech, Putin expressed his wanting to stop the supposed genocide in the Donbas region of Ukraine. In a translation of the speech provided by USA Today, Putin proclaimed, "the purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and

genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv Regime." (Funke, 2022). Russia invaded Ukraine and started the war the day after this speech was televised.

Putin is misappropriating the term genocide to try and be altruistic and frame himself as a savior to the ethnic Russian population of the Donbas region of Ukraine. His Invasion of Ukraine portrays the Russian people as a "military intervention to prevent atrocity crimes" (Hinton, 2022). Russia believes that by invading Ukraine, they are not starting a war but ending a war. A war that has supposedly been raging for eight years and that they are just now responding to out of a sense of self-defence.

These claims have been completely rejected by Ukraine, the United States, and the rest of the international community. There is absolutely no proof that any sort of genocide is occurring. One piece of evidence to support this is from a report from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This is a civilian mission on the ground in many different regions of Ukraine, and they have been present since 2014. They released a report stating that they have "found no evidence of mass targeted killings of civilians in the Donbas region." (Wesolowski & Penke, 2022). The Russian State Media and Government have no proof or evidence but continue to spread this disinformation to enhance their narrative.

Birds of Bio-Weapons

This is one of those claims that is as dangerous as it is bizarre. At first glance, you may laugh this off, but it can carry very serious implications. Russia issued an official statement claiming that the Ukrainian Government is working jointly with the United States to use birds to spread disease and dangerous pathogens to Russian Citizens. The idea is that the United States is training birds to follow specific migratory patterns to spread the various diseases to Russian

citizens. The Russian Ambassador at the United Nations and the Chief Spokesperson for the Ministry of Defense for the Russian Federation have presented this idea. The Russian Ambassador at the UN even went as far as to present supposed photographs of these bioweapons. Even going as far as claiming that they have birds with the United States military symbol on them. This piece of disinformation is an offshoot of another popular story circulating in which the United States supposedly has many active bio-labs all across Ukraine that are developing diseases and weapons of mass destruction.

This piece of Russian disinformation has infiltrated the extreme right-wing political messaging in the United States in which they spread this as if it were true. The United States government has laughed this story off and has continually denied any existence of such a program or facilities. There is still a large danger even though it is false. With the previous example of disinformation that I examined, its goal was to portray Russia in a positive light and come off as altruistic. The implication is more dangerous here. The danger is that this disinformation can be used or seen as a justification for Russia to use their chemical weapons or weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine. The rhetoric here is, 'well, if they can use chemical weapons, why can't I?'. This is a slippery slope that can lead to an extreme escalation of events if it is not dealt with appropriately.

Ukrainian Disinformation

Ghost of Kyiv

One of the only substantive pieces of disinformation that Ukraine has spread and promoted is the story of the so-called Ghost of Kyiv. During the first week of the Russian Invasion, various videos and images went viral showing off a Ukrainian Air Force pilot who had

singlehandedly taken down six Russian fighter jets. The official Twitter account of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense even shared these videos and were actively spreading these tales. It turned out that the video they had shared was fake and was created in a video game called Digital Combat Simulator. It remains unclear to this day if this jet pilot ever existed or to what extent their deeds were exaggerated or true.

Societal Implications of Disinformation

Hiding the Truth

Russia needs to keep its citizens' access to information limited so that it can continue controlling its population. This is reflected in the law signed by Putin on March 4th that focused on limiting the spread of knowingly false information. The punishment was jail time for up to 15 years. This gives Russia the power to jail any citizen who tries to access or spread information that contradicts what the state media is saying. On top of this, Russia has cut off its citizen's access to several popular social media and news sites so that they cannot be exposed to anything that would conflict with the narrative that the Government is presenting. To combat these Russian policies, the BBC has started to once again make use of shortwave radio broadcasts to try and inform Russian citizens of what is going on with the war.

Sociological Imagination

This is a concept that C. Wright Mills created in 1959. This concept is based on the "ability to see personal troubles as public issues and to consider the impact of broader social and historical context on personal situations" (Mooney, pg. 4). The sociological imagination allows people to be more aware of their society and less swayed or influenced by the social norms that are being presented to them and that are a part of their surroundings. It is all about how people

perceive the situation around them. Having a lack of sociological imagination can create apathy which can be exploited by powerful leaders like the Putin of the world. Russian citizens have a significant lack of sociological imagination, which leads to a warped view of the world because of their state media and what the Government tells them. This is further amplified by their inability to access other forms of information. Citizens are being manipulated into believing false narratives because they are under constant subjection to disinformation.

Effects on Ukrainians and Russians

For Ukrainians, hearing about things like "The Ghost of Kyiv" and the high number of Russian losses inspire Ukrainians and improves their morale. When the odds are totally against Ukrainians, stories and information like this help the mental strength of citizens. This is why we see the Ukrainian Government amplify stories that focus on the creation of Heroes and Martyrs, which dramatizes Ukraine's fortitude. These stories increase patriotism, meaning that they have strong feelings of support for their homeland.

For Russian citizens, on the other hand, the effects seen are more negative. The state media is meant to serve the Russian people with the exact framing that the Government wants. Telling people about potential bio-labs and birds turned into bio-weapons creates fear amongst citizens. Russian citizens will support their Government's actions if it means protecting them from these threats. This is especially true when the Government has begun to limit outside information, and all you are given comes from the state media. Disinformation is good for the Government to maintain its power, while at the same time, it is a significant detriment to the people and their freedoms.

Conclusion

We have been able to observe a number of different effects of disinformation on the Ukrainian and Russian people. It ranges from stories that, while false, inspire hope and improve morale to stories that have the purpose of fearmongering and aim to control people. Stories like the creation of bio-weapons enable Russia to be possible consider using weapons of mass destruction or their own chemical weapons in the future even though it is based on a lie. If left unchecked and unchallenged, disinformation can result in very dire consequences.

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