MEDIA AND WAR: SOCIAL MEDIA USED BY RUSSIA AND UKRAINE AS A PROPAGANDA TOOL DURING THE INVASION

[1] Gamal Abdul Nasir Makatita, [2] Mutia Hariati Hussin
[1] Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta
[2] Komunitas Indonesia Untuk Kajian Eropa, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta
Corresponding E-mail: mutiahussin.suryo@umy.ac.id

Abstract

This paper examines how media was used as a propaganda tool during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, analyzing the strategies employed by both Russia and Ukraine to disseminate propaganda, shape public opinion, and influence international perceptions. Understanding the intricate relationships between media, misinformation, digital literacy, and sociocultural factors is crucial in international conflict. This study investigates these connections and their significant impact on contemporary conflicts. It explores how historical events, cultural norms, and societal values shape public perception and responses to information distributed through various media channels. Emphasis is placed on the growing challenge of disinformation, where malicious actors manipulate information ecosystems to manipulate narratives and provoke conflict. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study illustrates how Russia and Ukraine use media for propaganda, highlighting new risks and underscoring the evolving importance of digital literacy as a critical defense mechanism.

Keywords: *Media, Disinformation, Digital Literacy, Invasion, Russia – Ukraine*

Introduction

As reported by Detik.com on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, which was an escalation of the geopolitical conflict between the two countries that began in 2014 when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and a separatist movement supported by Russia seized part of the Donbas region in southeastern Ukraine consisting of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (Q, 2023). The invasion forced 7 million Ukrainians to leave their country and triggered a European refugee crisis, with the highest growth rate since World War II. The attack was based on the premise of protecting the people of two self-proclaimed pro-Russian regions in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region from genocide. The denial that Russia had planned an invasion of Ukraine was proven to be talk after this was confirmed by the announcement of a special military operation to demilitarize the former Soviet state on February 24 in the morning (Arbar, 2023).

In its development, the news about the invasion carried out by Russia against Ukraine gave rise to discussions on a global scale through reports in the media and social media. Agus Subagyo (Subagyo, 2020), in his writing, stated that the existence of various non-state actors in the study of international relations quite significant, such as the media and press, which can influence opinion and build an image in a systematic and structured international order. Mass media plays a vital role in influencing audiences. It is done in various ways, such as fake news, propaganda, and disinformation, which also impact people's perception of an event. Without the knowledge or skills to use digital media, communication tools, or networks to evaluate news, this impact will be more dangerous. Realizing the importance of digital literacy in understanding mass media is the subject that the author will discuss in this article.

The research entitled "Social Media Dominance: Ukraine's Key Strategy in the Information War Against the Russian Invasion" explains how social media is dominant as a tool for the Ukrainian government to fight the Russian invasion (Syahrir Mujib, 2023). This research uses Media Warfare to explain the phenomena of propaganda, disinformation, and the media. An article written by Stephen Crane (1989) describes media as a market where wisdom is freely sold; it is a game and can also cause death. Mass media is not a combination of ink, visuals, sound, and paper, but it can influence anyone to act and seduce the masses endlessly (Andi et al., 2022). The digital era is marked by the rapid growth of technology and information, and the growth of information contained in it also drives societal changes. Technological developments can influence embedded social values, marking a shift in the meaning of viewing an event such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Research Methodology

This research was done by the qualitative descriptive method with literature study in order to analyze secondary data in the form of articles, journals, and the internet that had been completed research by the previous author. To obtain the data needed for this study, researchers looked for reading sources from this article.

Result and Discussion

Disinformation and Propaganda of The Russian

Currently, the world's attention is focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The ease of access to social media makes news of the invasion very easy to find; even without looking, the information will automatically appear on a cellphone. For example, the day after Russia attacked Ukraine,

precisely on February 25, 2023, one of the media affiliated with the Russian government spread the news that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had fled abroad, but not long after that, the Ukrainian president uploaded a video showing that he was in his mother's home—the Ukrainian city of Kyiv (Krisdamarjati, 2022). The example above proves that information is one of the most crucial things of warfare in the digital era.

Manipulation of information used to achieve specific goals can be called propaganda. Propaganda can be defined as disseminating information to the public through the media to influence public opinion on a particular phenomenon. In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both countries used propaganda to influence the thinking of domestic society and the global community. Quoting an article published by the Guardian explaining how Russia carries out propaganda against the existing media, Russia limits the dissemination of information on social media such as Facebook. The restrictions are a window for Russia to control the picture of the invasion of Ukraine to its citizens. It threatens to close independent media such as TV Rain, slowing and potentially cutting off access to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the Novaya Gazeta newspaper because they publish editions in Russian and Ukrainian with the headline "Russia is Bombing Ukraine." (Roth, 2022).

Apart from limiting social media in spreading information about the invasion by Russia, another form of propaganda carried out by Russia was creating a mass media company in the city of Berdyansk less than a week after Russia succeeded in controlling the city. The media company, which in English is called *Southern Front*, is a mass media company whose function is to spread pro-Vladimir Putin propaganda through social media such as YouTube, Telegram, and sites under Russian control. *Southern Front* first uploaded news on the first day of Russia's attack on Ukraine, and until now, this mass media already has several correspondents to supply information daily (Jack Goodman, 2022). The propaganda carried out by the *Southern*

Front is not only distributed through print media or TV channels but also through social media such as Facebook and Telegram, which have become platforms for regularly disseminating information in the form of videos containing baseless claims. For example, many of their reports claim that "peaceful life" has taken place in areas that Russia has invaded. This narrative justifies the war that Russia waged on Ukraine.

Picture 1. One of the Examples of Propaganda by the Southern Front
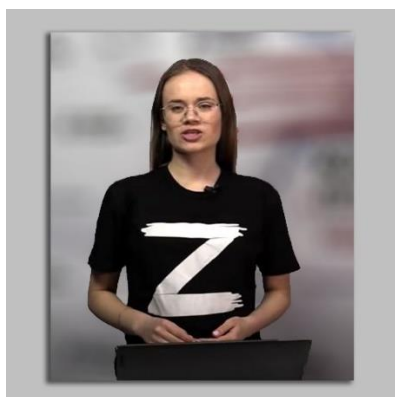
A *Southern Front* reporter wears a shirt with the Z symbol, which represents Russia's de-Nazification. The BBC article about this propaganda tried to trace the source of the *Southern Front* site, but the initially registered area used a Russian server from St. Petersburg. The server moved to Cloudflare in the United States, which indicated that the media owner was trying to cover up his identity (Romadon, 2022).

In addition to the Southern Front, Russia also carries out propaganda on social media such as TikTok. In a report published by the BBC and TikTok, it was reported that 800 fake accounts had sprung up since July, and TikTok reported that more than 12,000 fake accounts that originated in Russia had been taken down. The propaganda carried out by Russia was

by making one of the fake videos with the title 'Villa in Madrid' targeting Anastasiya Shteinhauz and her father, Oleksiy Reznikov, who is a former Minister of Defense of Ukraine. In addition, the Russian propaganda launched through TikTok also targets important Ukrainian figures such as President Zelensky, who are portrayed as obsessed with money and uncaring about Ukrainian ordinary or the war effort; the spread of this fake news also distorts the names of Hollywood artists such as Emma Watson, Scarlett Johansson, and Colin Farrel where in the bio of the TikTok account is written in the Russian alphabet.

Picture 2. Russia's TikTok Propaganda (One of the Examples of Framing in Mass Media)

Along with it, Peter D. Moss, in his writing, says that social media discourse is a cultural construct produced by ideology; through its narrative, the mass media offers specific definitions of life as examples of who is evil, who is the victim, and who is responsible when the Russia-Ukraine war occurs. Etc. An article by Masnur Muslich (Muslich, 2022), "The Power of Mass Media to Construct Reality," explains the function of mass media as

seen from a constructivist view. Constructivism sees mass media as a message channel and a subject that constructs reality, complete with its views, biases, and partialities. Understanding how the mass media constructs reality means that the media chooses which events are worthy of exposure as news material and which are inappropriate. Not only that, the media also chooses people or figures as news sources based on their criteria so that the reporting results seem one-sided. It is in line with the explanation in Saswati Gangopadhyay's writing, which states that the development of mass media has had a significant impact on news production. It has implications for the rise of news writers in the mass media, who have the potential to cause disinformation, propaganda, and bias in reporting (Gangopadhyay, 2014). In addition, one of the deadliest weapons in this fight has been and continues to be Russia's propaganda, which propagates misleading information and spreads ludicrous and contradictory statements, suggesting that both bombs and false information are attacking the country.

Research regarding the perception of the Russian population regarding the ongoing invasion, conducted by an Indian research institute called the Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM) starting on March 13, revealed that 68% of respondents approved and 12% disapproved of the "Special Operation" that occurred in Ukraine. Almost 67% of respondents consider Russia's security, in addition to disarmament in Ukraine and NATO intervention, to be a big reason for justifying the expansion of the Russian invasion. Apart from that, independent research institutions such as the ExtremeScan telegram channel found that 60% of respondents supported the war. The propaganda launched by Russia to change the attitude of its citizens towards Ukraine was considered successful, according to data from the Levada Center in 2013, which revealed that 75% of respondents claimed that there was no need to invade neighboring countries, the other 70% of respondents claimed that they did not

understand what was happening in Ukraine, most notably 80% of respondents support the invasion of Ukraine (LEFTEAST, 2022).

Disinformation and Propaganda of Ukraine

Like Russia, Ukraine, on the other hand, also uses mass media and social media to fight the invasion. According to several sources, the propaganda launched by Ukraine successfully countered the propaganda coming from Russia. Ukraine used persuasive steps to influence and change the minds of its citizens regarding the invasion that occurred; for example, after Russia announced its invasion, the Ukrainian president sent a tweet on Twitter with the sentence, "We will give weapons to anyone who wants to defend the country" this sentence is sending a robust patriotic message in all levels of societies despite their gender, age, and race (Baines, 2022).

Ukraine realizes that the difference in military strength encourages this country to be more active in launching propaganda against Russia. Smith et al. (1946) argued that propaganda is related to controversial issues, and most propaganda is emotional rather than rational in its content, which means that emotion is the core of propaganda (Gunawan, 2018). Smith's opinion aligns with the form of propaganda displayed by Ukraine to the broader public. Ukraine, through mass media and social media, is trying to provide a 'portrayal' that they are the party who has suffered the most, but on the other hand, the propaganda being launched is also trying to show strength in the face of the Russian invasion of his country. It can be found when we open the mass media, such as the tweet belonging to the president of Ukraine, which was posted on 24 February 2022. He wrote, "Russia treacherously attacked our state in the morning, as Nazi Germany did in WW II years. As of today, our countries are on different sides of world history. Russia has embarked on a path of evil, but Ukraine is defending itself and will not give up its freedom no matter what Moscow thinks." This tweet has been retweeted more than 16,000 times and successfully

generated thousands of comments from all over the world, providing support for Ukraine and condemning the invasion by Russia.

A strategy involving a network and communication in their action where one party in a conflict is called a Netwar. In practice, Netwar is conducted by a party with a smaller military defense capability than the opponent, so they will rely more on the internet and media to resist opponent attacks (John Arquilla, 1997). Global Fire Ranking in 2023 ranked Ukraine 14 out of 145 countries for its military capabilities, but organizing 14 worldwide does not make it easy for Ukraine to face the Russian invasion (Global Fire Power, 2023). The widespread distribution of photos and videos on mass media and social media to show the general public the condition of Ukraine when the Russian invasion made people aware; this type of propaganda is included in gray propaganda or open propaganda, which attacks sources who are exposed to propaganda openly or openly (Winda Kustiawan, 2022).

Picture 3. One of the Examples of Propaganda by Ukraine

Look at the image above; it is a viral Twitter meme. This picture illustrates how Russia's steps or propaganda are affiliated with or have the

same pattern when Paul Joseph Goebbels, a Nazi figure who was described as the 'Master of Propaganda,' carried out his propaganda during WW II. Unlike Goebbels or Putin, Ukraine's propaganda has to speak to multiple audiences: Ukrainians, the English-speaking world, and people inside Russia (Meaker, 2022). The success of Ukrainian propaganda cannot be separated from the role of President Volodymyr Zelensky, the actor in Ukrainian media propaganda, using his extraordinary skills. Volodymyr Zelensky was inspired to use his acting career in using modern media before becoming president. An example is his video about World War II, 'Victory Day,' aimed at a Russian audience. In the video, Zelensky equates World War II, which was triggered by Nazism, with Russia's invasion of his country (Rodgers, 2023).

Despite the success of Ukraine's propaganda in gaining public attention globally, in-depth research is needed to prevent fake photos, videos, and news from circulating freely on social media, whose responsibility is unknown. Misinformation spread by specific individuals can provide a wrong understanding at the global level regarding the conditions resulting from the conflict, which can apply to the immediate environment and spread more quickly. The spread of propaganda, disinformation, and fake news has had a significant impact on Russia, based on research conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022 showing a decline in countries' support for Russia's actions. The picture below shows information related to the decline in support for Russia from countries worldwide.

Table 1. Sharp Decline in Favorable Views of Russia

Sharp decline in favorable views of Russia

*% who have a **favorable** view of Russia*

	'07 %	'09 %	'10 %	'11 %	'12 %	'13 %	'14 %	'15 %	'17 %	'18 %	'19 %	'20 %	'22 %	'20-'22 Change
Italy	37	-	-	-	23	31	20	27	35	37	43	48	14	▼ 34
Greece	-	-	-	-	61	63	61	-	64	52	58	-	27	▼ 31*
Poland	34	33	45	35	34	36	12	15	21	22	33	-	2	▼ 31*
Israel	29	31	-	29	-	21	30	25	35	34	45	-	19	▼ 26*
South Korea	54	50	40	-	-	53	43	46	36	53	42	39	13	▼ 26
Spain	35	36	40	46	36	38	18	25	27	24	29	31	8	▼ 23
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	9	▼ 22
France	35	43	51	53	36	36	26	30	36	30	33	35	14	▼ 21
Canada	52	51	-	-	-	42	-	26	27	27	30	30	10	▼ 20
Netherlands	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	15	23	22	7	▼ 15
Germany	34	42	50	47	33	32	19	27	27	35	35	30	16	▼ 14
UK	47	45	46	50	38	38	25	18	26	22	26	24	10	▼ 14
Japan	22	23	30	28	22	27	23	21	26	26	25	18	6	▼ 12
Australia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	6	▼ 12
Sweden	31	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	19	12	16	5	▼ 11	
U.S.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	7	▼ 8
Malaysia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	47	-
Singapore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	27	-

*In Greece, Israel and Poland, change is measured from 2019.
Note: Statistically significant changes over time in **bold**. Prior to 2020, U.S. and Australia surveys were conducted by phone. See topline for results.
Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey Q51
"International Attitudes Toward the U.S., NATO and Russia in a Time of Crisis"
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The results of a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center show that almost all countries give Russia unfavorability. However, the decline rates for each country are different. Italy has the most profound decline in presentation at 34%, making Russia's rating among Italians only 14%. This decline was also seen in several European countries, mainly NATO members, including the United States, which provided only approximately 7% support to Russia at that time. Malaysia is the only country with a favorable presentation of 47% in this survey, which indicates that this country still has a positive outlook toward Russia. However, there are still differences of opinion regarding Russia among the Malaysian population towards Russia, since the use of Warfare has become widespread on social media (Richard Wike, 2022).

The development of information technology and the emergence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine forced all levels of society to have the ability

to analyze, search, and determine news sources contained in mass media or social media. The power has become known as Digital Literacy. According to UNESCO, digital literacy is a set of skills, including cognitive, writing, and reading skills from various sources presented on the internet (Iswandi, 2023). Digital literacy becomes essential in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine because propaganda content, for example, fake news and disinformation that spreads around us, needs to be balanced with the ability to sort out information on social media.

Conclusion

This article concludes that as technology develops, social media and mass media have more ways and means of spreading content that could be dangerous to a broader audience. Propaganda, false information, and fake news are a few of the things fueling the escalating conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine use a similar strategy on the battlefield to attempt to influence the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of their respective populations and the general public. We can combat propaganda like fake news and misinformation circulating among us by developing our digital literacy and sorting information from social media and mass media. We must be digitally literate to use social media more responsibly and sensibly.

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