

Digital Disinformation: Evidence from Ukraine

There is a pervasive fear that information technology enhances the effectiveness of destabilizing disinformation campaigns. Yet evidence from Ukraine, the paradigmatic case of “hybrid war”, indicates this threat is overstated. Rather, traditional media remain far more influential. The prevailing focus on technology hampers both analysis and the development of effective counterstrategies.

By Lennart Maschmeyer

The spectre of Russian “hybrid war” continues to haunt defense planners and audiences in the West. Digital disinformation campaigns are held to be a central means of waging such wars, extending a destabilizing influence even where military power does not reach. Some analysts now go as far as to suggest that non-military instruments have become the primary threat to Western interests. If true, this development would revolutionize the nature of conflict. Assessing the disinformation threat is thus both urgent and important.

To do so, the case of Ukraine is instructive. Analysts frequently refer to the term “hybrid war” to describe Russian aggression against Ukraine and the conflict that ensued in 2014. This concept is notoriously vague, referring to a mix of conventional and unconventional means of warfare, particularly the use of deception, sabotage, and disinformation. These types of operations are not new but have long been part of limited conflict. However, the cause of current fears is the assumption that information technology enhances the potency of these instruments.

Amidst Russia’s sustained use of hybrid war instruments in Ukraine, many see it as a “testing lab” for such tools. Particularly



Vladimir Putin appears on a TV screen in a shop on Crimea: Russian disinformation is said to have a destabilizing role in the Ukraine conflict. *Alexey Pavlishak / Reuters*

disinformation stands out, with former NATO Supreme Commander General Breedlove referring to Russia’s campaign in Ukraine as “the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg ever seen”. In short, Ukraine is a paradigmatic case of hybrid war, and disinformation campaigns are a key element in its presumed effectiveness.

Disinformation in this context refers to spreading information that is knowingly false, but also includes other deceptive instruments, such as inauthentic social media accounts posting as real people. Moreover, Ukraine provides ideal conditions for the success of disinformation campaigns as it is not only geographically but also culturally

and linguistically close to Russia and levels of trust in government have generally been low. Evidence from Ukraine can thus offer important insights into the potency of this threat, and lessons to address it.

A critical assessment of the efficacy of digital disinformation campaigns as an instrument of power in this conflict challenges these aforementioned assumptions. First, in contrast to the hybrid war narrative, there is little evidence of coordinated, large-scale digital disinformation campaigns in Ukraine. Second, there is scarce evidence that digital disinformation campaigns contributed to the Kremlin's key strategic gains. On the contrary, current research by the CSS in collaboration with the London School of Economics, the Shorenstein Center of new media at Harvard, and Internews Ukraine indicates that digital media are significantly *less* effective than traditional media in disseminating disinformation narratives. Similarly, social me-

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dia analysis suggests disinformation campaigns are limited in both scale and potential audience. This evidence indicates that prevailing fears around the effectiveness of digital disinformation are likely exaggerated and risk distracting from traditional media as an instrument of influence.

Moscow's Initial Strategy

The origins of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine lie in its attempt to extricate itself from Russia's sphere of influence, and Russian efforts to prevent this. When the Ukrainian Parliament voted to commence negotiations for an EU Association Agreement in February 2013, the Kremlin deployed a mix of overt and covert means to prevent this outcome. Determining Russia's strategic aims is a challenge since maintaining plausible deniability of its involvement is a key part of this strategy. Nonetheless, leaked Kremlin documents and phone calls allow distilling several core priorities. In 2013, a Kremlin document titled "The Complex of Measures" was leaked online, laying out four key strategic objectives: preventing Ukraine from signing an Association Agreement with the EU; forming a subversive network of pro-Russian social and political forces to influence Ukrainian politics; neutralizing the

influence of the pro-European movement; and facilitating Ukraine's accession to the Eurasian Customs Union (now the Eurasian Economic Union) by 2015.

Russian officials initially denied the authenticity of the document. However, independent experts concurred it was real. Leaked email exchanges from within the Kremlin later confirmed this. The document lays out a comprehensive plan to leverage diplomatic pressure, pro-Russian politicians, and subversive proxy actors to exert influence. It also specifies the need for an "effective propaganda campaign", influencing media content through "personal agreements" with the owners of TV channels. Significantly, it does not once mention digital media.

Expectations versus Evidence

Moscow fell well short of achieving these objectives. First, its diplomatic campaign backfired. Although President Vladimir Putin succeeded in convincing Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to withdraw from negotiations with the EU, this move was an important trigger for the Euromaidan protests leading to the eventual collapse of his government. Neutralizing the pro-European movement had evidently failed, and so did the efforts to nudge Ukraine's government towards membership in the Customs Union. Moscow activated contingency plans. According to leaked emails and phone calls between leaders of Moscow's proxy groups and their high-ranking handlers from Moscow, such as the "Glazyev Tapes", the takeover of Crimea and a subversive campaign targeting the Donbas constituted such contingency plans.

Overall, the Kremlin's failure to achieve its initial core objectives challenges expectations of the newfound efficacy of hybrid warfare. Despite dedicated Russian efforts since 2013 to prevent it from doing so, Ukraine has intensified its orientation towards the EU. However, Russia did achieve significant strategic gains in this conflict with the annexation of Ukrainian territory in Crimea and partial control over the Donbas.

There are many plausible interpretations regarding the evolution of the Kremlin's strategic intentions in Ukraine since 2014. However, the crucial point is that digital disinformation played no significant role in its key strategic gains: the takeover of

Crimea and partial control over the Donbas. The only tangible evidence of a coordinated disinformation operation related to the Crimean takeover emerged in 2017: an operation by one of Russia's secret services, the GRU, using a handful of fake social accounts to discredit the Maidan protestors. Russian propaganda outlets picked up some of their content. However, this operation was small in scale and not part of a longer campaign. Otherwise, there are only scattered reports of isolated disinformation campaigns, such as false SMS messages alerting Crimeans of an impending water outage in 2014. There is no evidence of coordinated large-scale digital disinformation campaigns, nor that digital disinformation contributed to the success of the Crimean operation. In fact, a recent study found that the vast majority of Twitter content relating to the Crimean crisis *challenged* disinformation narratives. Social media disinformation involved ad-hoc efforts to confuse Crimean audiences and leaders rather than long-term campaigns to sway public opinion. Hence, there is little evidence digital technologies helped increase the intensity or scale of this subversive takeover. The same applies to the subversive operation targeting the Donbas.

TV is King

In contrast, Russian TV channels popular among Crimeans – many of whom identify as Russians – exposed audiences to a constant stream of pro-Russian messaging. A Gallup survey in 2014 found that the four most popular news sources for Crimeans were Russian TV channels. Dmitry Dubov, an expert in disinformation at the Ukrainian National Institute for Strategic Studies, emphasized that digital technologies were unimportant in Crimea compared to traditional media and TV. Emails leaked from high-ranking Kremlin official Vadislav Surkov obtained and published by InformNapalm confirm this assessment. Surkov is widely credited as a key architect of Moscow's disinformation strategies and "non-linear warfare".

The popularity of Russian TV channels among Crimeans thus facilitated influence over public opinion at a scale that dwarfed all known digital disinformation operations – and over the long term. While there is still a lack of studies examining the direct causal influence of television on the success of the annexation of Crimea, its broad reach makes TV a much more plausible channel for effective influence over public opinion than ad-hoc social media campaigns. In line with this assumption, a 2014

study by Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas found clear evidence that exposure to Russian Television increased electoral support for pro-Russian parties in the 2014 Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections.

In short, while there is a pervasive lack of evidence that digital media facilitated the dissemination of disinformation that contributed to the Crimean takeover, there is strong indication that traditional media provided more effective channels and at greater scale. Evidence from the “hot phase” of this conflict thus strongly challenges expectations of the increased effectiveness of digital disinformation *vis-à-vis* traditional channels.

Evolving Tactics

Close to seven years have passed since Russia's annexation of Crimea, and while the conflict in Donbas has remained at a stalemate, both strategic objectives and disinformation tactics have evolved. Has this increased their effectiveness?

As efforts to integrate Ukraine in the Eurasian Customs Union fell through and after Russia had achieved territorial gains in Crimea, the Kremlin's objectives have shifted towards destabilizing Ukraine and fostering domestic division and distrust in its Western allies. In the absence of tangible evidence, there remain multiple plausible interpretations of the Kremlin's intentions. However, its grand strategic goal remains keeping Ukraine within its sphere of influence. This requires preventing Ukrainian EU membership and reversing its steps towards European integration.

Western analysts maintain that disinformation campaigns are a key instrument in pursuing this goal, especially as the military conflict in eastern Ukraine reached a stalemate. Yet, systematic research on both dissemination patterns and its impact remains scarce. Two comprehensive academic studies of Twitter content in 2018 and 2019 found no evidence of coordinated disinformation campaigns. These findings are perhaps not as surprising considering Twitter is only used by around five per cent of Ukrainians, which limits the representativeness of these studies.

Local researchers at Internews Ukraine have since documented the evolution of disinformation tactics. In a report from October 2020, they identify Facebook groups and channels in the messaging app Telegram, where disinformation narratives are

spread. Particularly the use of anonymous Telegram channels to spread not only disinformation narratives but also leak information obtained through hacks is an innovation in the Kremlin's approach. Ukrainian News Agency Liga.net discovered the appearance of several anonymous pro-Russian Telegram channels during the 2018 Ukrainian presidential election, but whether they

Research shows a surprisingly broad penetration of disinformation narratives, with 20–30 per cent of Ukrainians agreeing.

had any impact remains unknown. Overall, there remains a dearth of empirical data on the mechanisms through which disinformation campaigns exert influence, and on their impact on audience perceptions.

Triangulating Impact

An ongoing project by the CSS in collaboration with Peter Pomerantsev at the London School of Economics, Alexei Abrahams at Harvard's Shorenstein Center of New Media, and Volodymyr Yermolenko at Internews Ukraine aims to shed more light on mechanisms and impact of disinformation. Its preliminary findings challenge prevailing assumptions on the threat of digital disinformation campaigns.

The project tracks 17 current disinformation narratives identified by Internews' media monitoring project across Twitter and Telegram and measures the breadth of their dissemination and impact on audiences in a survey. These narratives mostly perpetuate long-standing themes in Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Ukraine as documented by local organizations such as StopFake and Internews, namely undermining trust in Ukraine's Western allies and in the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government. The bulk of narratives focuses on anti-Western content, one particularly popular notion is the idea of “external governance” of Ukraine by billionaire George Soros and the International Monetary Fund. Related narratives suggest a Western aim to “extort” Ukrainian land and “enslave” Ukrainians. Similarly, the EU is alleged of exploiting Ukrainians for cheap labour and for having imposed an unfavorable trade agreement on Ukraine. Narratives with a domestic focus highlight the threat of fascism in Ukraine and accuse current President Volodymyr Zelenskiy of “total dependence” on the West. Finally, another prominent narrative emerged re-

lated to the corona crisis, asserting that the US runs biolabs in Ukraine supposedly spreading coronavirus.

The findings of the Twitter analysis are in line with previous studies, showing only a low proportion of tweets disseminating these narratives. Accordingly, there is also little evidence of coordinated bot activity.

On Telegram, narratives were tracked through five channels identified by Liga.net as key outlets for the dissemination of disinformation. Contrary to expectations, there is a low penetration of narratives throughout these channels. An analysis of all posts from July to October 2020 (2,638 in total) showed only five per cent mentioned the tracked narratives. Cross-referencing these posts with Russian media also showed little evidence of coordination. As in the Crimean crisis, there is thus scant evidence of digital disinformation operations exploiting the presumed superior speed, scale, and effectiveness of digital media.

Survey results further challenge the expected effectiveness of social media campaigns. Overall, there is a surprisingly broad penetration of disinformation narratives, with 20–30 per cent of Ukrainians stating they agree or somewhat agree with the narratives tracked. These levels of agreement hold across regions and demographic factors such as age, education, and income. The same high levels of agreement prevail on even the most extreme narrative, on US biolabs spreading coronavirus. This raises the question where people get this information. On this, the survey data produces a surprise.

Correlating media consumption preferences to agreement with narratives indicates the more respondents watch Ukrainian TV channels owned by oligarch and close Putin ally Viktor Medvechuk, the more they tend to agree with the narratives tracked. This finding is exactly as one would expect based on previous research. The decision by the Ukrainian government on 2 February 2021 to impose sanctions on these channels, severely restricting their ability to broadcast, attests to their perceived importance.

However, running the same analysis with popular social media sources (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Telegram) shows the opposite: the more people get their news from these sources, the *less* they tend to agree with disinformation narratives.

This surprising finding further challenges prevailing expectations. Comprehensive statistical analysis has confirmed this nega-

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tive correlation continues to be significant even when including a range of demographic and geographic factors.

In short, preliminary findings suggest the opposite of prevailing threat perceptions: in Ukraine, traditional media has been a far more effective means of influence than targeted digital disinformation. Final results and a more in-depth analysis of the influence of disinformation on foreign policy preferences will be published later this year.

Conclusion

Two main implications follow from this analysis. First, evidence from Ukraine indi-

cates the current focus on the threat of *digital* disinformation may be misplaced. If Ukraine constitutes a quintessential case of hybrid war, as it is widely held to be, if anything it shows that traditional rather than digital media are the key avenue for the dissemination of disinformation. This finding is in line with some emerging research highlighting that traditional

media, primarily FOX News, were far more important and effective in spreading disinformation narratives during the 2016 US presidential elections than digital media. Consequently, strategies to counter the influence of disinformation should expand beyond the currently narrow focus on technology and digital media.

Second, current perceptions likely overestimate the effectiveness of disinformation as an instrument of geopolitics. Even under relatively ideal conditions in Ukraine, long-term exposure to disinformation and broad penetration of narratives has (thus far) failed to produce the desired outcome: re-

turning Ukraine to Russia's sphere of influence and reversing its pro-EU course. For now, evidence from one of the world's foremost "information battlegrounds" suggests that the threat is overstated. Nonetheless, disinformation campaigns may be a potentially useful tool when public opinion is divided along small margins. Moreover, particularly the interaction of digital and traditional media in spreading narratives deserves further attention.

For more on perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

Lennart Maschmeyer is Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich, where he focuses on cyber conflict, power politics and subversion.