

ONLINE PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION IN RUSSIAN UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract. *This paper examines propaganda and disinformation in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, paying particular attention to the role that social media and the internet played between March 2022 and March 2023. Both sides in the conflict used the online environment to shape public perceptions: Russia, through an intense disinformation campaign, and Ukraine, by attracting international support. Social media platforms have implemented measures to counter Russian disinformation, raising questions about information control and potential consequences for freedom of expression. Disinformation has had a significant impact on public trust in different types of media, with a trend of increasing trust in traditional (audiovisual) sources and decreasing trust in digital platforms. Russian tactics such as the use of "troll factories" and fake social media accounts have been key elements in this campaign. The importance of this topic is that it illustrates the critical dimension of information warfare in modern conflicts, where the manipulation of public perceptions can influence not only international support but also the legitimacy of the governments involved.*

Keywords: *Propaganda, Disinformation, Misinformation, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Social media, Information warfare, Information manipulation, Troll factories*

Introduction

This research analyzes the critical role of propaganda and disinformation in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with a particular focus on the online environment. In the digital age, social media and the internet have become essential tools in shaping public perception and influencing international opinion, thus becoming crucial battlegrounds in modern conflicts. This study examines in particular the period March 2022 to March 2023, when both Russia and Ukraine engaged in large-scale online campaigns, using social media platforms to pursue their respective agendas. The importance of this topic lies in analyzing how contemporary conflicts extend beyond physical battlefields into the realm of information warfare. In this conflict, controlling narratives, disseminating misinformation and manipulating public perception have become as critical as military action. Social media platforms, often the main vehicles for disseminating information, have also been central to this struggle. Their efforts to curb disinformation, especially Russian propaganda, raise important questions about the balance between combating falsehoods and maintaining freedom of expression.

The research uses a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative data collection to assess the dissemination and impact of misinformation. Key methods include analyzing social media posts, identifying disinformation campaigns and assessing public trust in the media. This study seeks to understand not only the strategies used by

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Russia to propagate false narratives, but also how these narratives have influenced the global public's understanding of the conflict. The objectives are twofold: to explore the dynamics of online disinformation in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and to assess the effectiveness and consequences of social media platforms' responses to these disinformation efforts.

This study is guided by two key research questions:

1. What impact has Russian disinformation had on international perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict?
2. How have measures taken by social media platforms to combat disinformation affected freedom of expression and the quality of public discourse?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of digital platforms in modern warfare, the challenges they face in regulating content, and the wider implications for democratic societies and international relations. In an age where information can be weaponized, the findings of this study will provide insights into the ongoing struggle between truth and manipulation in the digital landscape.

Overall analysis

The current military conflict between Russia and Ukraine has a new front, which has emerged in the armed conflicts not so long ago, namely the modern information space - social media and the internet. The role of social media has been observed since the Euromaidan uprising in Ukraine, the crisis in Crimea and the separatist rebellion in Donbass.

Both Russia and Ukraine have used social media to promote their agenda. Russian-origin sources were observed mainly using social media to spread misinformation about the conflict, while Ukrainian sources sought support from others, mainly Western countries (Fau, 2022). During the conflict, it could be observed that social media took various measures to restrict Russian-origin disinformation news. Blocking access to news of this type, however, demonstrates the ability of social media platforms to restrict a certain type of information, which is a threat if we look at the situation from other perspectives. One of the situations approached from a different perspective may be that of restricting political agendas or any type of information that could be considered as non-compliant with the policies and standards of these platforms.

According to Figure 1 we can analyze which were the most viewed articles in English on Wikipedia in 2022, so in the top we find articles such as *"2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine"* with about 50 million views, followed by articles titled *"Vladimir Putin"* or *"Ukraine"*. Wikipedia is not the most trusted source of information, but this factor is not known by the general public who use this online encyclopedia as their first source of information. The diminished trust in Wikipedia stems from the fact that every user of the platform can make changes to the information provided on the page, which are not always checked by the editors. Thus, it is easy enough to promote certain misinformation on Wikipedia, and those who do not inform themselves from multiple sources tend to trust the popular internet encyclopedia.

Article title	Number of views
Cleopatra	55,882,835
Jeffrey Dahmer	54,010,852
2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine	50,314,503
Deaths in 2022	46,512,168
2022 FIFA World Cup	46,435,339
Elizabeth II	43,566,103
YouTube	39,227,778
Elon Musk	27,875,674
Vladimir Putin	25,464,698
Bible	23,730,279
Ukraine	23,558,137
Cristiano Ronaldo	22,693,305
Skathi (moon)	22,445,809

Showing entries 1 to 13 (100 entries in total)

Figure 1 Most viewed English articles on Wikipedia in 2022, Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1358978/wikipedia-most-viewed-articles-by-number-of-views/> accessed on 17/04/2023

Thus, some users who are able to distinguish fake news from the real news by noticing the presence of fake news on popular news sites and various media sources have started to question the reality of what they see and read online, which increases trust in traditional media across Europe. According to Figure 2, public trust in traditional media (audiovisual and print) has improved over the last year, but trust in the internet and social networks has declined.



Figure 2. Trust in the media, Source: <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2017/05/trust-gap-between-traditional-and-new-media-widening-across-europe> accessed on 19/04/2023

More detailed data can be seen in Annex 1, according to which audiovisual media is the most trusted in Europe. Radio is considered to be the most trusted source, with 59% of EU citizens trusting this medium, closely followed by television at 50%. Over the last five years, trust in both media has increased across Europe.

Confidence in print media has also increased over the last five years, despite the fact that a large proportion of EU citizens do not consider these sources to be trustworthy. At the same time, it can be seen from Annex 2 that trust in the internet and social networks continues to decline, with trust in social networks at an all-time low. Only 36% of EU citizens trust the internet, while only 21% of EU citizens trust social networks. In all 33 countries surveyed, the same pattern could be observed - the number of people who do not trust social networks was higher than those who trust it.

Some major regional variations could also be observed. For example, citizens in South-Eastern Europe and the United Kingdom have the least trust in print media, while citizens in Western Europe have the least trust in social networks. Nordic countries have the highest level of trust in radio and television. In Finland, for example, 82% of people trust radio and 78% trust television.

Asked *which of the following news sources they pay more attention to in relation to the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, according to Figure 3, citizens from different countries responded in different ways. Engaging with news about the war between Russia and Ukraine occurred mostly via television or online media in the five countries selected for this study, and German consumers were the most likely to receive updates about the war via television, with 46% of them saying they did so.

Meanwhile, over 20 percent of Brazilian respondents paid the most attention to social media for news on the topic, compared to just six percent of Germans. Indeed, German respondents were generally less likely to have received updates via online news channels and, along with the Polish audience, were the most likely to have used radio as their main news source for updates on the Russia-Ukraine invasion.

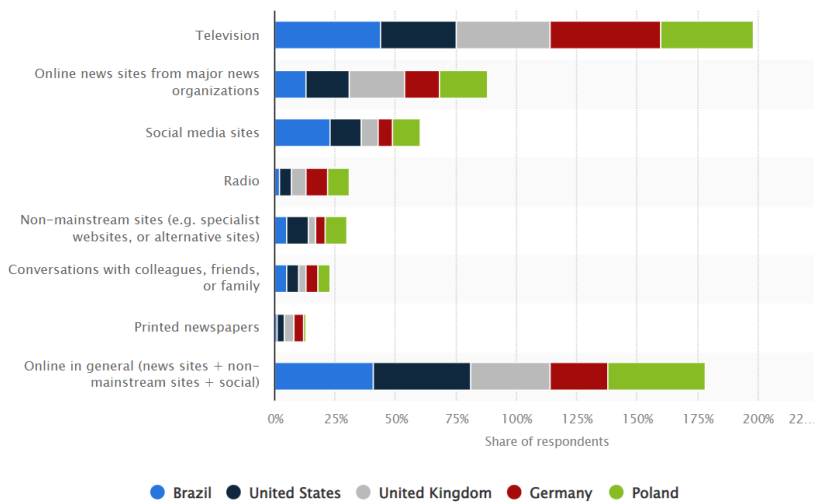


Figure 3. News sources with the most attention for news about the war between Russia and Ukraine in selected markets around the world on February 20, 2022, Source: <https://bit.ly/3OJ3OWA> accessed on 15/04/2023

To create a more global picture of the adult public's level of trust in the media, we analyze a study that examined media perspectives in 40 countries. According to the results of this study, presented in Appendix 3, levels of trust differ considerably around the world, although, for the most part, trust in the media in Europe is highest. Western Europeans in particular trusted the media more than citizens in other parts of the world, with 65% of Finns, for example, trusting the news.

The United States and Slovakia ranked at the bottom of the world in terms of consumer trust in the media, along with Hungary, Taiwan and Greece. Media sources in some of these countries can be seen as insufficiently independent from state institutions. In general,

globally, social networks are considered to be a less reliable source, as can be seen in Annex 2. In the current climate of political events, both younger and older generations find it increasingly difficult to trust the media.

With a decreasing level of trust in the available sources of information, we observe varying opinions of European citizens on certain events related to the current Ukrainian conflict. For example, in May 2022, around 90 percent of people in Finland believed that Russia was primarily responsible for the outbreak of war in Ukraine, compared to five percent who believed it was the fault of Ukraine, the European Union or the United States, as shown in Figure 4. In ten different European countries, an average of 73 percent of citizens believed that Russia was responsible for the war, with Italy having the lowest percentage of people who believed this, at 56 percent.

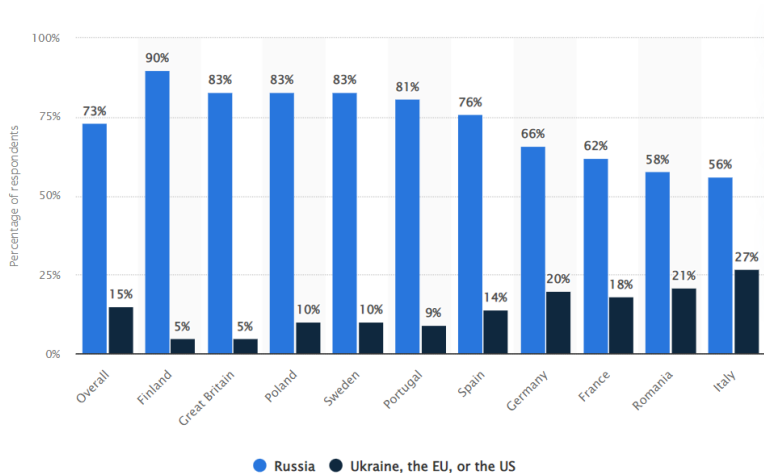


Figure 4. Who is mainly responsible for the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1314900/europe-survey-on-responsibility-for-war-in-ukraine/> accessed on 18/04/2023

As we have seen in Figure 4, even if with a large discrepancy, the opinions of European citizens are nevertheless different. As we have identified, a large majority consider Russia to be the aggressor country and to blame for the current conflict, but there is also a minority who have a different opinion, and claim that the blame for the conflict lies with Ukraine, the EU or the US.

In order to see in more detail who are the supporters of Ukraine and Russia in the current situation on social media, we will analyze the share of posts containing the message of *#IStandwithUkraine* or *#IStandwithRussia*, represented by Annexes 4 and 5. Annex 4 presents us with data that, as of December 2022, social media posts from Ukraine accounted for the largest share of global posts containing the hashtag *#IStandwithUkraine*, expressing support for Ukraine in the Russian invasion that began in February 2022. Posts originating from the United States followed closely behind with a share of over 32%, followed by Canada, Germany and Australia.

Annex 5, on the other hand, presents us with information that, as of December 2022, social media posts from India accounted for the largest share of global posts containing the hashtag *#IStandwithRussia*, expressing support for Russia in the war in Ukraine. Posts from the United States followed with a share of over 16%, followed by South Africa and Pakistan.

As a result, we can see that there is a parallel between the sources used by citizens for information, the level of trust in the media and the level of trust in the information about the Russian-Ukrainian war. The media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, and the lower the level of trust in the media, the less trust the public will have in the information provided, even if some of it is true news, proving that trust in these sources is an important variable in creating well-informed societies.

Disinformation tactics

Disinformation is false, inaccurate or misleading information deliberately created, presented and disseminated, as we have previously identified. The actions taken by Russia fall squarely within the definition of disinformation (Leshner et al, 2022). Often information from Russian sources is false or conceals part of the truth (Cadier et al, 2022). Russian actors use various strategies to introduce, amplify and spread false and distorted narratives around the world. The methods by which they spread information rely on a combination of fake and artificial accounts, anonymized websites, and state media sources to distribute and amplify content that promotes their interests and undermines competing narratives (Cadier et al, 2022).

Russian propaganda and disinformation actions are produced on a massive scale and are distributed in massive numbers across various types of information media, both online and traditional media. Among the producers and promoters of this type of content are the notorious Russian trolls, who will be discussed later. The disinformation tactics used, however, can be as diversified as one can imagine. Thus in 2020, Facebook identified a Russian military operation targeting Ukraine, where the participants of this operation had created fake profiles on Facebook and pretended to be journalists, creating fake news stories where they tried to spread disinformation in a way that could appear more credible to the public (Facebook, 2021).

Similar tactics could also be observed during the current conflict, which may indicate the continued presence of disinformation approaches and the constant need to adapt and create new methods once previous ones are revealed. Thus, one of the new tactics used was even uncovered by the British government, who found that some influencers on TikTok were being paid to promote pro-Russian content (The Guardian, 2022). Attempts to manipulate public opinion on social media have also taken place on Twitter and Facebook, with efforts being extended to other platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

The Russian government also runs coordinated information and/or disinformation campaigns on its own social media accounts. An example being 75 Russian government Twitter accounts, with 7.3 million followers amassing 35.9 million retweets, 29.8 million likes, and 4 million replies, tweeted 1,157 times between February 25 and March 3, 2022 (Thompson & Graham, 2022). Approximately 75% of the tweets targeted Ukraine, and many of them promoted disinformation that questioned Ukraine's status as a sovereign state, drew attention to alleged war crimes committed by other countries, and spread conspiracy theories (Thompson & Graham, 2022). Some accounts have used the "typo squatting" method, making a record on websites using a deliberate misnomer of similarly named websites of popular media platforms in order to mislead (Dwoskin, 2021). An example being the creation by Russian trolls of a fake website of the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* to spread misinformation about the reported atrocities in Bucha (Stefanicki, 2022).

These disinformation tactics have been used for many years, even before the current Ukrainian conflict. The actions of the Internet Research Agency, the notorious troll factory which we will discuss in more detail later, have been known for many years. In 2017, Facebook exposed 126 million of its users promoting disinformation before the 2016 US elections, as well as the fact that more than 50 countries have been targeted by false information shared by those accounts since 2017, the most frequently targeted during that period being the US, Ukraine and the UK (Stamos, 2018).

Another disinformation tactic used is the feedback loop method. One such loop has been observed in the case of a conspiracy theory that emerged about biological facilities in Ukraine masquerading as a secret biological weapons program. The initial theory was promoted by a number of Twitter accounts related to conspiracy theories in the United States, amplified by mainstream media, being television news in this case, only to be shared by Russian state propaganda (Ling, 2022).

Which audiences believe the pro-Kremlin disinformation?

Pro-Russian disinformation primarily targets current pro-Russian supporters, who support the ruling Russian party and the views of the Russian government (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017). In the U.S. there are also supporters of the Kremlin regime in the U.S., often identified as partisans, who seem more likely to believe information congruent with their political beliefs (Pereira et al, 2018). Another group targeted by pro-Kremlin disinformation news are those who do not trust the US government, an example of which is Russia Today which shares its messages to this specific audience (Yablokov, 2015).

Another study identified yet another correlation with trust in pro-Kremlin disinformation. From one point of view, studies show that Ukrainians tend to avoid political choices based on ethnicity or language (Erlich & Garner, 2021), being accommodated to an existing difference (Wanner, 2014). However, the current foreign policy implemented by Russia tends to reunite the "fragmented world of Russian-speakers" (Makarychev, 2014), and to protect the Russian language (Tsygankov, 2015). At present, we can see that the Russian government sees the ethnic and linguistic diaspora as a potential supporting force for its foreign policy (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015). Thus, considering Russia's current policy with reference to language and ethnicity, as well as the fact that the spoken language has become more a matter of choice, identification with Russian ethnicity and the use of Russian can be correlated with belief in pro-Kremlin claims and distrust of true statements (Wanner, 2014).

Another category would be citizens who lack political awareness and political information (Carpini et al, 1993). In theory, those with political awareness should be better able to discern true news from fake news. Awareness should also be positively correlated with educational attainment, which has been shown to be a variable in citizens' news awareness (Seo et al, 2020). Nyham (2010) indicates in this context that increased news consumption in general may increase consumers' trust in fake news. A sub-category in this context may be citizens in rural areas, where a smaller number of news is present, the number of social media users is also lower due to the unavailability in some areas of internet access, thus this category is more vulnerable to pro-Russian statements and news.

The Impact of Social Media

The impact of social media on the current conflict in Ukraine may indeed be significant. The war has been dubbed as the first TikTok World War by several news media, such as The New Yorker or France24 (2023), due to users who continued to spread

relevant information in real time, thus creating a channel on the platform called "WarTok" (Brown, 2023). While some information is shared by real user accounts, a concern about fake or bot accounts is growing more and more, due to the misinformation they promote. Thus, according to Figure 5, we can see some recent statistical data from 2019 showing the level of concern about fake information on the internet or social media platforms in Ukraine and Russia in the post-Euromaidan and Crimean occupation period, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

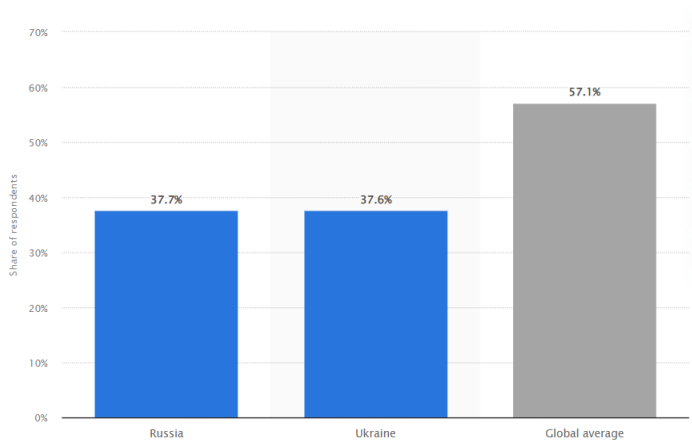


Figure 5. Concerns about false information on the internet or social media platforms in Ukraine and Russia 2019, Source:<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1346417/ukraine-russia-concern-false-information-internet-social-media/> accessed on 25/4/2023

According to this 2019 report, 37.7% of the Russian population was worried about fake information on the internet and social media platforms, with 37.6% of Ukrainians sharing the same concerns. The overall average level of concern was 57.1%.

During the early stages of the conflict in Ukraine, several posts with similar content could be observed on several social networks, some of which were promoted by non-authentic identities, but not all of them were related to the current conflict. Some of this information contained spam, or even a bitcoin fraud scheme was uncovered claiming to support the Ukrainian resistance (Brian, 2022). Social media platforms such as Meta, YouTube, Google, Twitter, and TikTok, have taken important steps to restrict Russia's use of social media for disinformation. As these platforms have a large reach, the measures they have implemented have truly impacted a large number of people (Kern & Scott, 2022b). However, it should be noted that different platforms have implemented different positions in this regard. Some of the most common measures implemented by social media platforms include lowering the ranking of Russian state-affiliated media posts, meaning removing them from recommendations on YouTube and Twitter, placing them lower in the Instagram stories feed, etc (Suciu, 2022). Other measures involved banning Russian media pages such as RT or Sputnik on social media platforms (Suciu, 2022).

Another significant measure implemented was the banning of advertisements or sponsored posts from social networks and the demonetization of Russian state-affiliated accounts. Here, social media platforms implemented this measure in a different way. Twitter banned all ads originating from Russia and Ukraine, YouTube and Meta demonetized

Russian state media outlets, and Google completely stopped selling ads in Russia and banned these media outlets from buying and selling ads through its platforms (Kern & Scott, 2022b). As for some more specific measures, Meta has adapted its platforms' content moderation policies to *avoid deleting content that originates from ordinary Ukrainian citizens expressing resistance and anger towards the invading military forces, an action that is considered unacceptable* (Kern & Scott, 2022a). This measure has sparked controversy, with Meta being accused of Russophobia by Russians, claiming that the measure allowed and facilitated hate speech against the Russian population and Russian soldiers to go uncensored.

TikTok has acted differently from other social media platforms. While the other social media platforms managed to implement a number of measures against misinformation, TikTok did not take any official stance, and was even accused of spreading fake news about the conflict (Al-Saied, 2023). Finally, TikTok blocked Russian state-controlled media for EU users, and stated that it would label content from state-affiliated media. Therefore, despite the controversies surrounding TikTok, all of the platforms mentioned have taken steps to combat misinformation about the conflict, most of which are directed against Russian state-affiliated media by restricting their access or visibility on the platforms. While this is being done for a legitimized and widely supported cause at present, the measures put in place, as mentioned earlier, could be a threat if used for other purposes.

The Impact of Troll Factories

Russian troll factories have played a significant role in reshaping the truth in the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict, both domestically and internationally. In addition to conventional propaganda, social media bots and trolls are becoming the main actors of computational propaganda. They automate or distort their identities to impersonate real users to collect, disseminate, and communicate news and information, creating false consensus or promoting discord.

On March 1, 2022, just days after the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory, a set of Russian-language Twitter accounts spread a lie that Ukraine had manufactured civilian casualties. One Twitter account shared a video of a man standing in front of rows of dark gray body bags that appeared to be filled with corpses. As he was talking to the camera, one of the shrouded bodies behind him raised his arms to stop the top of the bag from flying off. The video was taken from an Austrian TV report about a climate change demonstration in Vienna in February (YouTube, 2022), but this Twitter account claimed the footage was from Ukraine. That post was in turn picked up by countless other Russian Twitter accounts, these were subsequently removed by Twitter for violating the platform's manipulation and spam policy (ProPublica, 2022b).

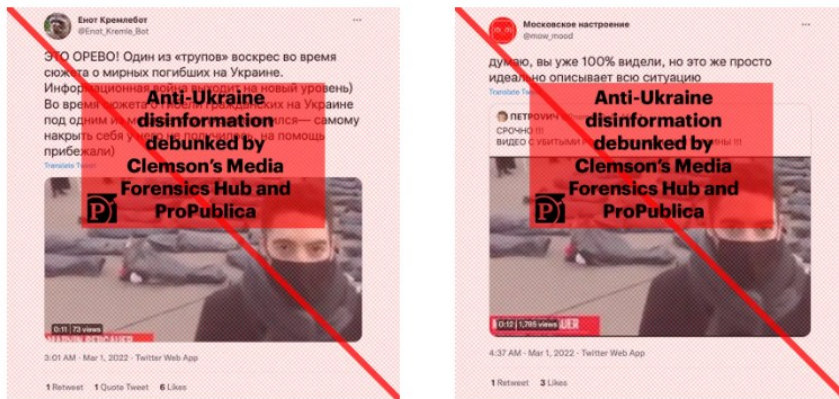


Figure 6. Two Russian-language Twitter accounts have posted a video which they say shows that the Ukrainian media has falsified reports of civilian casualties, Source: <https://bit.ly/3qeNkv6> accessed on 25/04/2023

"Propaganda makes mistakes too, one of the dead bodies came back to life just as they were counting the civilian deaths in Ukraine," one tweet said. Ironically, another tweet with the same footage blamed Ukrainian propaganda, *"Ukrainian propaganda doesn't sleep,"* it tweeted (AsiaTimes, 2022).

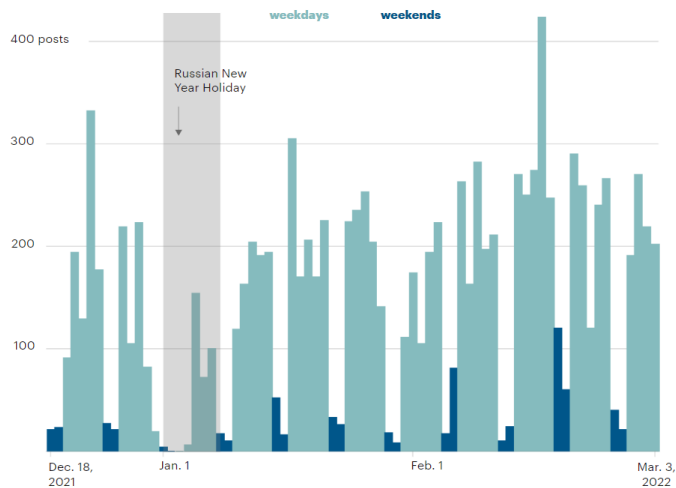


Figure 7. Russian Twitter accounts that spread propaganda posted more during weekdays, Source: <https://www.propublica.org/article/infamous-russian-troll-farm-appears-to-be-source-of-anti-ukraine-propaganda> accessed on 25/04/2023

According to Darren Linvill, a professor at Clemson University, along with another professor, Patrick Warren, the behavior, content and coordination of these accounts are consistent with the Russian troll factory Internet Research Agency - the network of pro-Putin troll accounts spread on Twitter, TikTok and Instagram. *"These accounts express every indicator that we have to suggest they're from the Internet Research Agency, and if they're not from the IRA, it's worse, because I don't know who is,"* Linvill said (ProPublica, 2022b).

An analysis by the Clemson Media Forensics Hub and ProPublica found that posts originating from these types of social media accounts were shared at a certain time interval, consistent with IRA business hours, and contained similar or identical text, photos, and videos across different accounts and platforms. The number of posts on Twitter accounts decreases considerably on weekends and during Russian legal or religious holidays, suggesting a regular work schedule for making and sharing this type of posts (ProPublica, 2022b).

According to a new report by Indiana University's Social Media Observatory and the Polytechnic University of Milan, shown in Figure 8, on the day Russia invaded Ukraine, the number of new Twitter accounts created nearly tripled. The report indicates that 38,000 new accounts were created on the day of February 24, 2022, up from 13,500 on the previous day.



Figure 8. Daily number of Twitter accounts created during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Source: <https://www.statista.com/chart/27229/number-of-newly-created-twitter-accounts-almost-tripled-on-the-day-russia-invaded-ukraine/> accessed on 25/04/2023

The social networking site TikTok has been particularly successful in promoting Russian government statements, where they mock US President Joe Biden and share disinformative videos. These posts garnered over 250 million views and over 8 million likes (Foreign Affairs, 2021). On Twitter, troll accounts attacked jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and accused the West of preventing Russian athletes from competing under the Russian flag at the Olympics (ProPublica, 2022a). As of the end of February 2022, the network of troll accounts have set their focus almost exclusively on Ukraine, replaying similar narratives and content on accounts and platforms. One troll account on Twitter accused the Ukrainian military of using civilians as human shields in a post. This account also portrayed Ukraine as challenging Russia at the behest of its "masters" in NATO. Both tweets received hundreds of likes and retweets and were posted on the same day as the body bag video (ProPublica, 2022b).

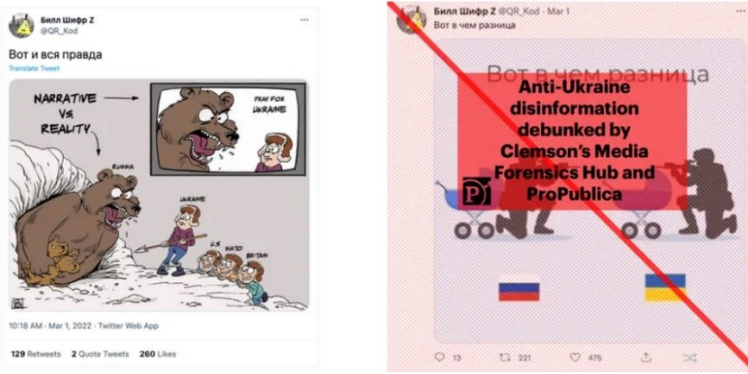


Figure 9. Twitter accounts have distributed memes reflecting propaganda spread domestically by Russian state media, Source: <https://bit.ly/3qeNkv6> accessed on 25/04/2023

The findings indicate that professionalized trolling remains a force in Russian propaganda efforts domestically and continues to adapt across all platforms, according to Linvill (AsiaTimes, 2022). Since late February 2022, Russian troll accounts on social media have picked up messages from Russian officials justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These accounts also blamed NATO and the West in the context of the current situation in Ukraine and sowed doubts about the true death toll among Ukrainian civilians and Russian military failures. When the Western sanctions packages came into effect and several Western companies began to withdraw from Russia, Russian trolls declared that this was good news for Russia on the grounds that Russian products "*are better and of higher quality than Western ones*" (AsiaTimes, 2022).

Also during this period, the Russian government enacted a legislative package restricting Russian citizens' access to social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, and passed a law under which people who contradict the Russian government's official position on the war risk up to 15 years in prison. The pro-putinist troll network included around 60 Twitter accounts, more than 100 Tiktok accounts and at least 7 on Instagram during the early days of the conflict, according to analysis by the Clemson Media Forensics Hub and ProPublica teams (ProPublica, 2022b).

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the role of propaganda and disinformation in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, focusing on how these strategies were implemented through online platforms between March 2022 and March 2023. The objectives were twofold: first, to explore the impact of Russian misinformation on global perceptions of the conflict and, second, to assess the implications of social media platforms' efforts to combat misinformation, particularly in terms of freedom of expression. The research addressed these objectives by answering two key questions, both of which are central to understanding the evolving nature of information warfare.

The first research question sought to examine the extent to which Russian disinformation has influenced global perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The findings reveal that Russia's disinformation strategies - mainly the use of false narratives, troll farms, fake accounts and manipulated media - have had a substantial impact on public opinion formation, both in Russia and internationally. Russian campaigns have been designed to blur the lines between truth and falsehood, creating confusion about the

legitimacy of Ukraine's position, the motives of Western countries and the nature of the conflict itself.

However, the research also demonstrates that while these efforts have managed to influence certain audiences, particularly those already predisposed to pro-Russian narratives, they have failed to completely dominate the global discourse. Ukraine's strategic use of social media to portray itself as a victim of aggression, coupled with widespread condemnation of Russia's actions by international institutions and Western governments, has countered much of Russia's disinformation. As a result, Russian disinformation has largely failed to change the general international consensus, which continues to support Ukraine's sovereignty and to view Russia as an aggressor.

The second research question focused on how measures taken by social media platforms to combat disinformation have affected the quality of public discourse and the balance between controlling false information and maintaining freedom of expression. The research found that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok have implemented a variety of measures, including removing Russian state-affiliated media, downgrading disinformation content and demonetizing accounts linked to disinformation. These actions have significantly reduced the visibility of Russian propaganda, limiting its reach and influence, especially in Western countries.

However, the study also highlights the challenges and risks associated with these measures. By actively moderating and limiting certain types of content, social media platforms have entered a complex space where the distinction between legitimate control of harmful disinformation and potential censorship is blurred. The blocking of certain accounts, while justified in the context of limiting the spread of false information, raises questions about the potential for overreach and erosion of free speech rights. In particular, critics argue that these actions could set a precedent for the suppression of politically inconvenient information in other contexts, leading to wider implications for freedom of expression in democratic societies.

This study highlights the evolving nature of modern conflicts, in which the informational battleground is as important as the physical. In an era in which digital platforms serve as the primary source of information for a large part of the global population, the ability to control narratives, combat misinformation and maintain the integrity of public discourse is crucial. The findings of this research contribute to a broader understanding of information warfare, providing insights into the strategies employed by state actors such as Russia, as well as the responses of digital platforms tasked with mitigating their impact.

The study concludes that while efforts to combat disinformation are necessary and largely effective, they must be balanced against the need to protect democratic values, in particular freedom of expression. In the future, it is essential that both governments and technology companies develop clearer guidelines that protect both the public from harmful disinformation and the fundamental rights of individuals to free and open communication.

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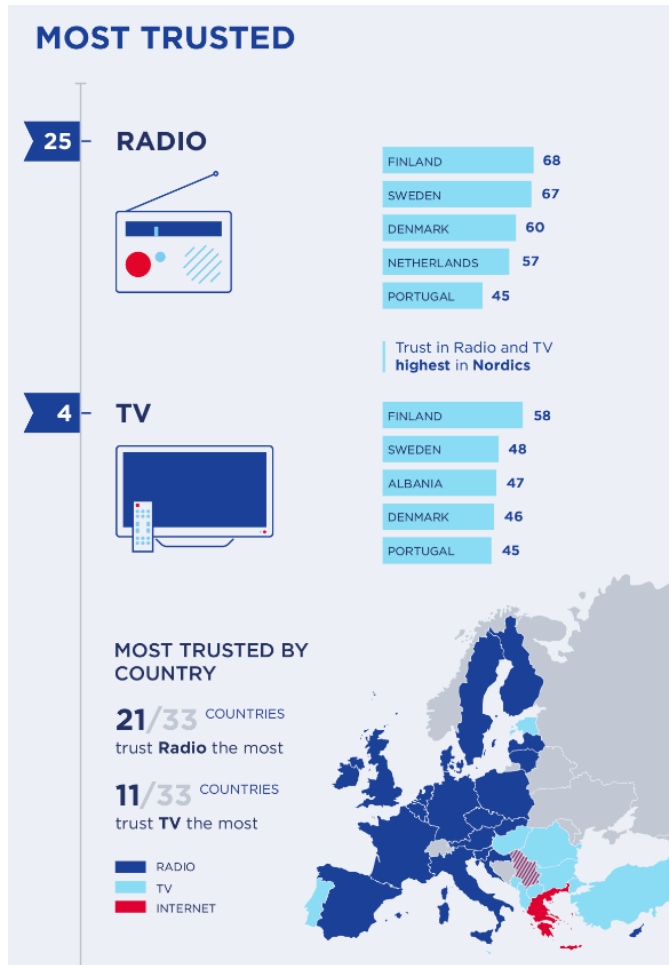
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Annexes

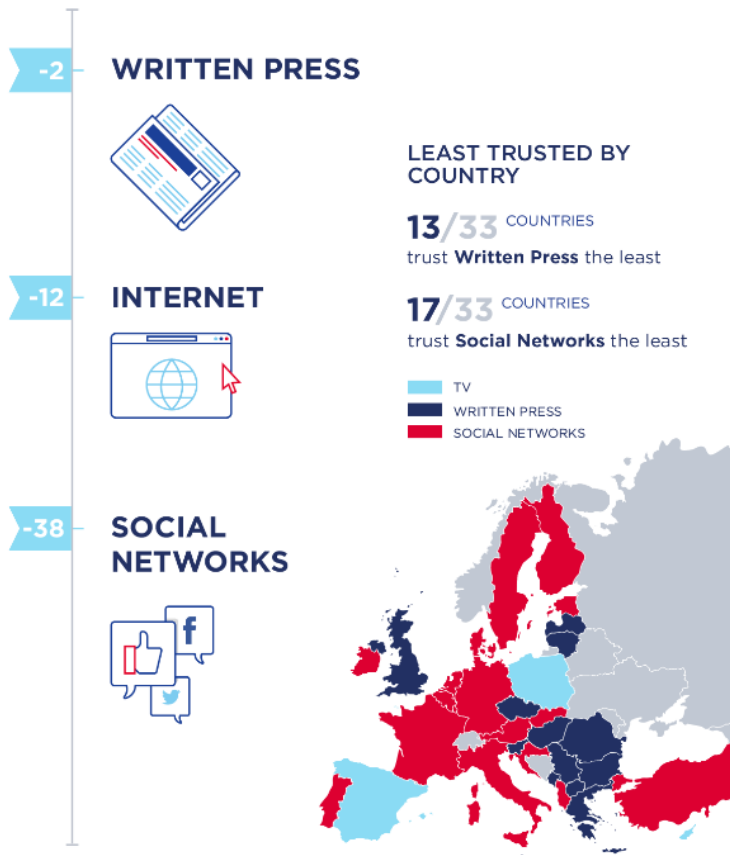
Annex 1. Most trusted sources in Europe



Source: <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2017/05/trust-gap-between-traditional-and-new-mediawidening-across-europe> accessed on 19/04/2023

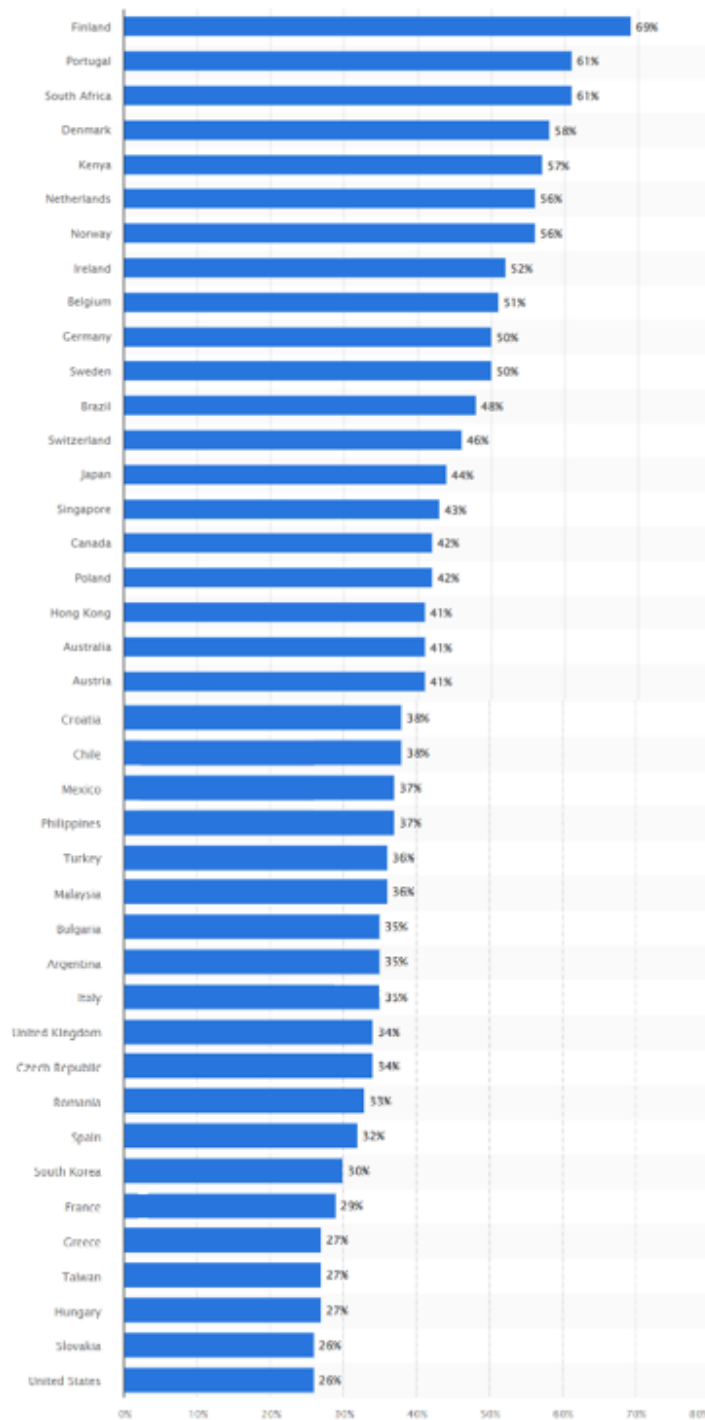
Annex 2. Europe's lowest-interest sources

LEAST TRUSTED



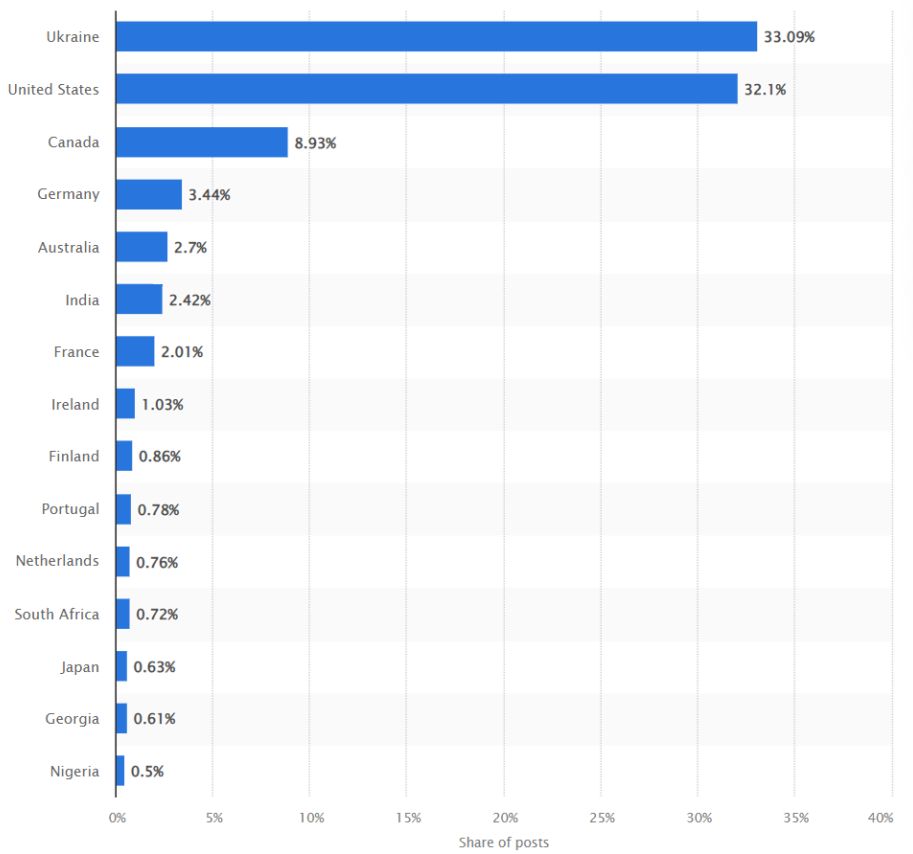
Source: <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2017/05/trust-gap-between-traditional-and-new-media-widening-across-europe> accessed on 19/04/2023

Annex 3. Share of adults who trust the media most in selected countries worldwide in February 2022

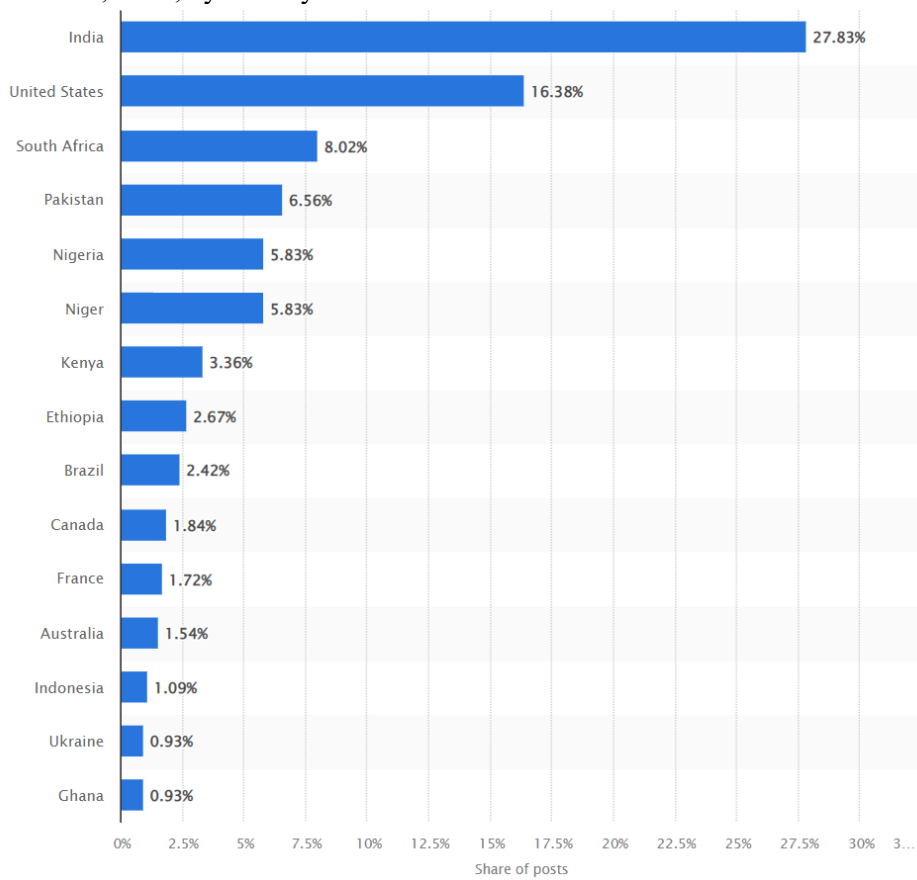


Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/308468/importance-brand-journalist-creating-trust-news/> accessed on 15/04/2023

Annex 4. Share of social media posts containing #IstandwithUkraine worldwide on December 23, 2022, by country



Source: <https://bit.ly/3BZENi0> accessed on 17/04/2023

Annex 5. Share of social media posts containing #IstandwithRussia worldwide on December 23, 2022, by country

Source: <https://bit.ly/3MzV6XO> accessed on 18/04/2023