

# Perception and opinion of the Ukrainian population regarding information manipulation: A field study on disinformation in the Ukrainian war

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## Abstract

The war unleashed following the Russian invasion of the Ukrainian territory has provided an avalanche of information regarding military and strategic events, information which has conditioned policy making as well as the development of the current world order. Like any armed conflict, war not only takes place in the trenches and on the battlefields, but the weaponization of elements of disinformation and propaganda towards the general population and nation states can influence the outcome of the conflict as well. These elements might become powerful weapons that partly condition future events. This field study and research, carried out across Ukrainian territory, explores the perception by the Ukrainian people of information manipulation, taking into consideration different population groups. It should be noted that Ukrainians suffer from a constant and daily misinformation bombardment that seeks to undermine the morale of its people, yet elements of resilience in the form of a 'strong and clear criterion' regarding balance and imbalance of forces can still be found. As a result, this research examines the fundamental sources used by the Ukrainian population to obtain information, the use and reception of informative propaganda via social media, its critical analysis, the participation and interaction of the population in today's global communication spaces, and finally, the level of credibility of both foreign and national media in depth. The themes discussed were explored via qualitative research during a series of oral interviews conducted with subjects directly related with the defence of the country, women, and higher education professionals. Our conclusions highlight the challenges that disinformation poses upon the Ukrainian population and its national and international organizations in the fight against information manipulation.



## Keywords

Disinformation; War; Propaganda; Social networks; Social media; Field study; Focus group; Fake news; Media literacy; *Telegram*; Zelensky; Russia; Ukraine.

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## 1. Introduction

Within the research and cooperation framework developed in coordination with the *National Police of Ukraine (Patrol Unit of the Police Academy)*, the *Science and Technology Cooperation Program COST-H2020*, and the *Communication Department of the Ukrainian Army*, a field study was proposed to document disinformation in European societies where war is present.

<https://www.cost.eu>

The use and treatment of information is, without a doubt, a powerful weapon used in numerous international conflicts. Recent wars around the world have entailed a very significant burden on disinformation processes and strategies, which have tipped the balance in favour of one side or the other. As a logical reaction, worldwide public opinion, and European public opinion in particular, has been impelled to not be impartial, persuaded by the information that has reached their territories from different wars around the world.

However, this situation is not new. Human beings have been aware of the power of disinformation since ancient times. If one analyses it from a classical perspective, we find that

“Aristotle taught and philosophized about the idea of disinformation when he contrasted, in parallel, the notions of good and evil on the one hand [sic] and of truth and falsehood, on the other” (Díez-Medrano, 2022, p. 2).

The history of humanity, therefore, is full of scenes and actions in which the manipulation of the enemy, and the group interest itself, was a fundamental tool for the consolidation and justification of certain facts, as well as a basic element for positioning a political or war-related idea. Manipulation is an exercise of power; a tool that is used without palliatives for the neutralization of the opponent.

From this point of view, one can understand that we are facing a new era of hybrid conflict, always starting from the premise of psychological manipulation, of influencing the perception of the enemy, and the use of communication as a multifunctional discipline. All of these are combined to achieve a certain level of influence on the protection of a nation state’s interests. Many studies have been carried out in this field of expertise, and those conducted by Cano (2021), Jordán (2018) or Manfredi-Sánchez (2020) are worth noting. In the case of Russia and the current war in Ukraine, as studied and referred to in these pages, the main maxim is the ability to use different means of destabilization, not exclusively war-related, to deeply reach targets, and with great effectiveness. In this regard, the control of the different communication algorithms, social networks, and dissemination of media opinion, through international and national media, and even the use of artificial intelligence, is crucial. With regards to Russian disinformation policies, various studies provide sufficient information on the capacity of this country to use powerful weaponry to influence geostrategic control. Thus, interference in conflicts on the African continent (Ruiz-Cabrera, 2022), or in the recent war in the Donbas, a precursor to the current Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2017), are important.

It is especially relevant, at a social level, and from the field of communication processes in general, to carry out a field study on the perception of information manipulation in population groups, with a special interest on the Ukrainian territory

For these reasons, it is especially relevant, at a social level, and from the field of communication processes in general, to carry out a field study on the perception of information manipulation in population groups, with a special interest on the Ukrainian territory.

This exercise helped the research team describe and deepen the perception analysis of the affected population, and propose different formulas that can, at least, warn about the use of these deeply hostile communication strategies.

## 2. Bibliography review

Before the war between Ukraine and Russia finally broke out in 2022, the academic community had previously dealt with the consequences of the disinformation phenomenon and fake news, both in relation to the praxis exercised by information professionals (López-Borrull; Vives-Gràcia; Badell, 2018; Posetti; Matthews, 2018), and their influence on new forms of propaganda, which intervene as powerful elements in geopolitical conflicts (Botei, 2017; Vamanu, 2019; Badillo, 2019; Guadagno; Guttieri, 2021; Pomerantsev, 2022; Magallón-Rosa, 2022; Saliu, 2022).

Within this recent academic and research approach, the case for Ukraine and Russia has received special attention, and has been addressed in depth by various researchers focusing on the role played by fake news and propaganda on the diplomatic and information strategy of the two countries until the escalation of the conflict (Khalدارova; Pantti, 2016; Boyd-Barrett, 2015; 2018; Helmus *et al.*, 2018; Martín-Ávila, 2018; Murrock *et al.*, 2018; Posetti; Mathews, 2018; Haigh; Haigh; Matychak, 2019; Colom-Piella, 2020; Manor, 2021). Research has also been carried out, to a lesser extent, on the development of the war itself (Aydemir, 2022; Chernobrov; Briant, 2022; Donofrio; Rubio-Moraga; Abellán-Guzmán, 2022; Geissler *et al.*, 2022; Morejón-Llamas; Martín-Ramallal; Micaletto-Belda, 2022; Palomo-Domínguez, 2022).

However, given the nature of war and its logistic difficulties, academic field research is difficult to find, as most of the work has been primarily focused on the study of social network contents and discourse analysis on traditional publications and media. Field research, both qualitative and quantitative, as proposed in the present work, remains practically non-existent.

### 3. Disinformation and war: Russia and fake news

#### 3.1. Disinformation and international conflicts

Disinformation processes do not have a temporal frame that is circumscribed to the war process, but rather a path that grows over time. Some of the key aspects that citizens must face in the advent of a war are fake news, related publications, media controlled by pressure groups, social media takeover or the absence of good practices in the exercise of journalism and supranational communication. It can also be acknowledged that this disinformation machinery and their key aspects steadily progress until the very outbreak of war. The attention granted by Europe and the scholar community to the growing threat of manipulation of the news is quite recent. Badillo, for example, states that

“the entire debate on disinformation in Europe is limited to the last five years.” (Badillo, 2019, p. 25).

Although it is difficult to fully support this statement, we can point out that it was only recently when Europe began to see this phenomenon as a significant threat to citizen coexistence and even to the security of the continent. This has led to the creation of disinformation recognition tools, such as the web platform: “EUvsDisinfo” ([euvsdisinfo.eu](http://euvsdisinfo.eu)), and the recent development of a series of national resources that analyse and denounce false and biased information in different areas. These include those engaged with the spread of news that demoralize, agitate, or influence both the Ukrainian and world populations.

On the other hand, participation and media intervention, including that of the mass media, for the persuasion and modification of citizen awareness and opinion, have been developed through different phases. In this sense, we agree with other studies which focus their attention on the evolution of social networks from elements of democratization of the information, to places that can no longer be trusted. All of these developments of information systems have taken place in recent years, ultimately fostering

“a consolidating trend: of an opaque world, in which there is information fatigue and more state propaganda.” Magallón-Rosa (2022, p. 53).

Once the foundations for this phenomenon have been laid, it is clearly observed that Russia has taken the leading role in recent years. In this sense, one of the most notable events was the propaganda and fake news campaign during the US election process. Since 2016, Posetti and Mathews (2018) noted several relevant facts about Russian participation in the digital and social ecosystem, where large audiences participate. This destabilizing movement, which affects world powers, reaches its maximum expression with the accusation by the American intelligence agencies of Russian intervention in the presidential elections that were held that same year. However, this phenomenon is not recent. History sees Russia, since the Cold War, as a world actor and key player with a concrete ideology, one based on the resurgence of the nation against the threat of the West; therefore, it has a long tradition in the fight against Western media propaganda and any opposing ideologies (Chernobrov; Briant, 2020).

Ukraine would be just one more chapter in its logical development and position of expansion in its sphere of influence, a policy which is determined by resurgence. We agree with the opinion of Ruiz-Palmer (2015) that Russia, throughout history, has found timely justifications and training grounds in the Gulf War, the first war in Chechnya, the Civil War in Syria, or the war with Georgia. The truth is that the use of disinformation does not come as a surprise, rather it is a very valuable functional tool that Russia has been mastering since the Cold War and even prior.

Author Colom-Piella (2020, p. 473) points out that Russia has a long history regarding the use of propaganda aimed at internal political control and geopolitical expansion. The origins go back as early as the 19th century, via the activities of the tsarist secret police and the communist revolution. The *disinformatsiya* department was active well into the 1960s, managed by the KGB and under the authority of the *Politburo*, a key player during the Cold War. In this period, there was already talk of the:

“‘Agit Prop’, a contraction that came from the Bolshevik era that meant ‘agitation and propaganda’ (*otdel agitatsii i propagandy*), and which designated measures aimed at influencing and mobilizing target audiences” (Ruiz-Palmer, 2015, p. 9).

The main objective of the Russian propaganda strategy in these decades would have been to communicate the positive aspects of socialism, and spread negative messages regarding the West. Consequently, the age-old tradition of using disinformation tactics such as propaganda gained an unusual height after Putin came to power, although somewhat more so since the US presidential elections and the war in Ukraine.

Today, as years ago, Russian propaganda continues to see the West as its main target, and the objectives seem very clear: to discredit Western policies, destabilize their governments, and project Russian interests in the international sphere

Academic studies regarding propaganda techniques currently used by Russia are numerous. They tend to look into highly advanced technological elements, such as: the exploitation of bot networks, the use of trolls, or data mining to catalogue system users (Colom-Piella, 2020). In this technological field, the use of artificial intelligence may be starting, which will very soon make it almost impossible to identify hoax from truth (Flores-Vivar, 2019, p. 205).

It is also important to acknowledge the study by Ponce-de-León (2022) regarding the amount of news broadcasted by pro-Russian media for Spanish-speaking countries during the first months of the invasion. This study provided a definitive conclusion regarding the dissemination of information during the advancement of Russian troops, versus a decrease in news headlines as Russian troops retreated, all of which was justified under the banner of a 'motivational purpose' for the targeted audiences. At this stage, not only was false information given, but also propaganda, which was equally quite effective when correctly broadcasting genuine information at a given moment.

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Despite the fact that traditional mass media continues to be used as part of the Russian strategy via television channels such as *Russia Today* (RT), and news agencies such as *Tass* or *Sputnik*, the focus seems to have shifted towards the virtual world, particularly social networks (Helmus et al., 2018; Jaspe-Nieto, 2021). In these virtual realms, Russia has developed its presence in digital and clandestine media such as blogs and websites, while also becoming engaged in the creation of bot farms to directly disseminate its propaganda strategy and fake news. In this sense, Russia has developed a multichannel and well-coordinated propaganda strategy via its own online and offline media platforms. This strategy reaches and impacts unrelated media outlets, through orchestrated disinformation campaigns aimed at generating controversy in the networks (Jaspe-Nieto, 2021, p. 6).

Within the framework of the current digital ecosystem, which exploits dynamics such as *clickbait*, the collaborative construction of news, or the rise of the creator's economy, the digital ecosystem allows for the dissemination of unverified content, and therefore, the spread of disinformation. Through a well-organized network of trolls, hackers, and analyst services, with ubiquitous presence in many digital spaces, Russia has taken advantage of this ecosystem by combining traditional and digital tools to reach broad layers of society.

### 3.2. Media uses and disinformation in Ukraine during the pre-war context

Without delving into historical details and staying with the war which concerns us, the starting point of the Ukrainian case arose in the year 2013, a time when the pro-Russian government of Yanukovich decided not to complete the process of entry into the EU (Badillo, 2019). Russian pressures took effect, and the rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU, after the dismissal of Yanukovich, led to the invasion of the Crimean Peninsula. In this sense, authors such as Boyd-Barrett (2015; 2018) agree that Russian communication channels eventually distanced themselves, and that the government of this country felt legitimized to carry out the invasion of Crimea, as a "response to Kiev's takeover of pro-Western power" (Teurtrie, 2022, p. 8). In fact, this interference by the Russian government, its institutions, and their media, has been studied by authors such as Crăciunescu (2019).

For example, the active role taken by the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, as a user of social media networks, has strengthened the counter-disinformation narratives disseminated by the Russian media. It is an underground war, hence

"it could be stated that the two countries have been at war on social networks since shortly after February 2014" (Donofrio et al., 2023, p. 23).

However, the escalation and the impact of Russian propaganda in Ukraine has a specific date: the Crimean crisis in 2014 and the following separatist referendum on its political status, calling for its annexation to the Russia Federation. Following Putin's signing of its annexation and the lack of international recognition, Russian intervention in Ukraine has been increasingly frequent, with the development of various propaganda tactics that escalated up to the outbreak of war. In this sense, the downing of Malaysian flight MH17 over the contested area of the Donbas, following a (disputed) Russian missile strike, offers a propaganda counter-narrative that reveals the use of fake news to hold the Ukrainian forces accountable.

If we move forward in time, into the outbreak of the war, the range of fake news propagated by the Russian side has been varied, starting at the early stages of the war with: constant rumours that President Zelensky fled Kiev during the

first weeks of the conflict, the use by Ukraine of ‘actors’ hired to play the role of war victims, the systematic denial of attacks on civilian installations under the argument that the operations would have focused only on military objectives, and the discouragement towards Ukrainian refugees fleeing to Poland, from spreading false news about attacks to Polish citizens at the border (Wesolowski, 2022; Fasano, 2022; Alonso, 2022).

In Russia, Putin has used his available resources to fuel a nationalist and patriotic discourse focused on reclaiming the role of the former Russian empire as a superpower on the international stage, a role (according to this narrative) necessary in an increasingly multipolar world. His attacks have focused on what he sees: a declining hegemonic West trying to impose its influence on Ukraine. During this time, the use of social networks through a coordinated bot strategy that exposed Ukrainian users to previously selected topics, has been a constant occurrence (Geissler *et al.*, 2022, p. 21; Khaldarova; Pantti, 2016, p. 19; Jaspé-Nieto, 2021). In Ukraine, on the other hand, the message has been very different, where reaching out to a niche population favourable to its interests, and fostering political divergences in order to disseminate a story that would influence public opinion, was proffered. In this sense, the Russian propaganda tactic since the beginning of the war has been focused on showing the invasion as measured and selective military operations that sought to liberate regions which had legitimately decided to declare themselves as pro-Russian. Also, part of the Russian state propaganda tactics has been the liberation of these regions from a neo-Nazi state while protecting Russian ethnic minorities and disassociating itself from any influence on the rebel militias.

For several years now, Moscow has used a “mirror technique” in its information rhetoric regarding the war, replicating the information from the *Ukrainian Government* but focusing on content that endorses its priority themes and objectives. Here, the defence of the language aspect, as a vehicle of national identity and its dissemination message, has played a vital role in its propaganda tactics to maintain its influence in Ukraine (Jaspé-Nieto, 2021, p. 4). This has made a large part of its Russian-speaking population an audience of media sponsored by the Kremlin.

### 3.3. Ukrainian disinformation and media uses as a defensive tactic

Related to the specific object of our investigation, we need to highlight the creation of a defensive counter-narrative aimed at raising the morale of the Ukrainian people. This narrative, as Palomo-Domínguez (2022, p. 2) indicates, is not only produced in the invaded territories, but is intended for a “European creative community”, hence “allowing them to contribute in an influential way to the storytelling present and which surrounds this war”.

In the last year, it has been shown that this type of storytelling and its implementation strategy has some similarities with regards to an earlier Russian narrative, particularly in aspects related to disinformation such as: political bias, the intervention of foreign agents, botnets, conspiracy messages on social networks, etc. (Haigh; Haigh; Matychak, 2019). Since the start of the war, numerous fake news items designed to raise the morale of the Ukrainian population and exalt the heroism of its army have appeared, most of which have circulated on networks such as *Twitter*, amplified by official Ukrainian government accounts. Thus, fake news with a ‘markedly creative component’, such as that of ‘The Ghost of Kiev’, a pilot of unknown identity who would have shot down several Russian planes, or ‘The guards of the island of the snake’, a story about a Russian military unit that while advancing towards this island, offered an ultimatum to the thirteen border personnel that guarded it, with these guards heroically resisting before being assassinated (Cook, 2022; Thompson; Alba, 2022). Both of these news items, shared via the official *Twitter* account of the Ukrainian government, were retweeted thousands of times and proved to be false. These are just two examples of the line of propaganda followed by the Ukrainian government, aimed at both its own population and the international media, and characterized by a strategy that aims to provoke sympathy for Ukraine and hostility towards Russia.

From the Ukrainian side, the success of Kiev in the face of adversity is emphasized, highlighting a narrative of counter challenge (Aydemir, 2022, p. 8) with videos and stories of Zelensky, as leader, occupying a central role, through an extensive use of traditional media and social networks. These narrative highlights that the Russian invasion damages international peace, hence Ukraine conveys the need for universal condemnation of a serious problem which affects Europeans; in fact, we are at the earlier stages of a greater setback with regards to how human rights are violated by Putin’s regime. In the same manner, Ukraine messages try to show that it does not pose a strong military threat to Russia, and highlights the atrocities committed by the Russian army, and their effects on the daily lives of the civilian population in the country and, in the long term, on the European continent itself.



Figure 1. Post about “The Ghost of Kiev” made by the official *Twitter* account of the Ukrainian government. <https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1497834538843660291>

The narrative led by the Ukrainian government is complemented by a recurring representation on social networks of imagery from women in the front lines with Molotov cocktails, military suits, or carrying weapons, which stands out as a symbol of the people's resistance to the occupation. This type of Ukrainian propaganda and fake news is intended to emphasize a message of heroic resistance to win the support from international public opinion. At this stage, the collaboration exercised by hundreds of international streamers has been a key factor. The counter-narrative proposed by the Ukrainian government has attracted and garnered the attention of content creators worldwide, indeed a remarkable event. Although these content creators do not normally deal with issues related to journalism or international geopolitics on their channels or accounts, many of them came to Ukraine and, as a result, provided a communicative structure and a public tone which favoured the direct monitoring of the war, but also turned it, to some degree, into a spectacle.

On the other hand, dozens of Ukrainian streamers have broadcasted live videos, interrupting their broadcasts due to the bombings, others recounted what their days were like living in a bunker, or said goodbye to their homeland while undergoing a journey as refugees.

#### 4. Research objectives and questions

The main objective of the present study, through various qualitative methods, is to analyse the uses and consumption of media and information by Ukrainian citizens during the war with Russia, and to highlight the relationship they develop with the disinformation strategies adopted by both sides. Through a qualitative field study which compiles testimonies from the actors involved, we also intend to answer the following objectives or research questions:

- To investigate if Ukraine citizens play a proactive role in the generation of informational content related to the war or if it is simply reactive.
- To discover if they confer greater credibility to journalists and traditional media or if, on the contrary, they prefer to experiment with new forms of communication linked to the digital world: streamers, influencers, etc.
- To clarify whether these same citizens have the necessary analytical tools and habits to identify false news on the Internet and what behaviours they tend to develop in such case.
- To discover the importance given by Ukrainians to fake news and informative propaganda as useful tools for the development of the war.

Based on the analysis of results and the proposed methodology, while paying great attention to the instrumentalisation of the propaganda message, in the context of the digital and collaborative ecosystem, in which society find itself today, it is possible to conclude that this system continues to be of crucial importance during war and conflicts. Yet this research aims to discover aspects of this ecosystem: the use of new technologies, and the appearance of participatory environments increasingly built by and for audiences. While the rise of content creators, who have diversified the information spectrum offerings, and introduced practices of transmission in real time, have significantly changed the effects and broadcast strategies of the message, these players are facilitating the dissemination of propaganda and modifying its effects from a geostrategic point of view.

#### 5. Methodology

The impact of the Ukrainian war on disinformation and media is a documented fact. This research delves into this matter through a field study carried out between October and November of 2022. After establishing contact with military authorities from Kiev and Kharkiv through the *United Nations* and the *Spanish National Police*, numerous meetings and interviews were organised; these involved: thirty qualitative interviews, many visits, a focus group, and conversations with organizations involved in the war effort such as:

- *Mission Jarkiv*  
<https://missionkharkiv.com>
- *Help the Army 2014*  
<https://www.facebook.com/help.army.kharkiv>
- *Warrior Liberation Women Association*  
<https://freeourheroes.com>

Interviews were also organized with different members of Ukrainian society and institutions, such as military personnel, police officers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, volunteers, and translators between the ages of 18 and 65. In addition, a meeting was arranged, under strict anonymity, with a special envoy from one of the major North American media outlets.



Figure 2. The Mexican YouTuber @alextienda narrated the conflict and recounted his live difficulties while leaving the country when the conflict entered its crudest phase.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeoOiqazJcw>

The interviews took place in three cities in the country: Chernivtsi, the capital Kiev, and the major secondary city Kharkiv, between October 17<sup>th</sup> and November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, a period in which artillery and air bombardment attacks by the Russian Federation intensified on vital Ukrainian infrastructure, while the Kharkiv Oblast was mostly liberated from Russian occupation.

In this context, a series of interviews and a focus group were conducted with the *Warrior Liberation Women Association (WLWA)*, an association formed by women, daughters, sons, and relatives of more than 8,000 fighters from the Azovstal-Mariupol power plant who were held as prisoners of war by the Russian Federation. The interview lasted for approximately three hours, involved 12 individuals, and was held at a café near the Monastery of St. Michael in Kiev.

This selection of interviewees covers a range of professions that remain prominent during the war in Ukraine, and provides a relatively broad view of the media consumption habits of the Ukrainian people who were socially and professionally active.

A quantitative methodology was discarded, as most of the interviews and meetings were conducted in the first or second line of combat. In addition, continuous indiscriminate bombings and attacks on networks and communication structures by the Russian Federation made it virtually impossible to generate quantitative data through the internet or social media. Therefore, data had to be obtained through individual interviews, scheduled visits, or the focus group.

This documentation process, which received logistical support from the communication department of the Ukrainian army, the Ukrainian police, and the National Guard, generated a series of qualitative primary evidence and sources that served as the crux of presented research.

## 6. Analysis

The excess of information facilitated by the digital ecosystem, through the proliferation of media platforms and information networks, causes fake news or poorly contrasted information to have more opportunities to spread at a greater speed than ever before (Badillo, 2019). In armed conflicts where propaganda has always played a fundamental role, this phenomenon is even stronger. After conducting field study interviews, several coinciding aspects were detected: first, a great distrust of Ukrainian citizens towards media outlets close to the Russian sphere. The statements show that the Ukrainian population is aware of the disinformation and propaganda that comes to them from Russia, which circulates mainly through digital telematic channels. This research clearly highlights that the inherent characteristics of fake news messaging were clearly identified by those interviewed. In this sense, Ukrainians are looking for alternative channels of information.

“We use everything we can, especially now that there is a lot of information about the war. However, there is confusion of information here and there, so we are using all the sources we can to gather information about our relatives under Russian detention. We are especially looking for what we need.” (Female member of *Warrior Liberation Women Association* participant in the Focus Group who prefers to remain anonymous, Kiev, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

For example, this trend was particularly evident in the case of the focus group conducted with members of the *WLWA* (women, daughters, and relatives of fighters from the Azovstal power plant in Mariupol). It should be noted that these soldiers are prisoners of war of the Russian Federation and that, in their case, they have received extensive coverage in both traditional media outlets and social networks due to a long siege and detention, in which they became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance during the conflict.

Some of the interviews with the women of the *WLWA* showed that for them, as well as for certain groups of the Ukrainian population, the internet, and social networks, as well as local and mainstream press, were “forensic tools” intended to help them find relatives, friends, and acquaintances who were/are in a situation of imprisonment, which, as of the date of the interview, exceeded 8,000 combatants in Russian hands. This issue could be contrasted with what is indicated in the *Geneva Convention*.

Therefore, as we have noted, the interviewees coincided in stating a total distrust towards Russian media, preferring (according to some testimonies) international media or social networks as favoured options to stay informed.

There is an increasing awareness of the power of social networks in the hands of citizens (Geissler *et al.*, 2022), as elements for the dissemination of information on the ground, on international public opinion. Today, these citizens also play an active role in the intentional creation of propaganda, taking advantage of the collaborative power of these types of platforms.

Although these content creators do not normally deal with issues related to journalism or international geopolitics on their channels or accounts, many of them came to Ukraine and, as a result, provided a communicative structure and a public tone which favoured the direct monitoring of the war, but also turned it into a spectacle

“During the beginning of the war, I shared ads on social networks, such as: people looking for equipment to dig trenches in Kiev, free spaces in cars, or places to stay for the displaced.” (Member 2 of *Warrior Liberation Women Association*, Kiev, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022).

“With regard to sharing content on social networks: when we were in Mariupol, we had no electricity or internet, so we had no possibility of sharing anything (...) I wanted to, but physically I couldn’t.” (Member 4 of *Warrior Liberation Women Association*, Kiev, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022).

The sources consulted in both Kiev and Kharkiv agreed that mental health and clinical support were crucial when operating and working in war zones. It is important to recognize that those who experienced such situations were dealing with traumatic events that will leave a mark on them for the rest of their lives. These experiences are documented by both combatants and medical personnel or volunteers on the front lines, resulting in graphic and explicit content that can increase the incidence of “digital trauma” among the Ukrainian population.

Social media has become a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, especially when the information space is contested, as is the case in today’s internet. This has led to a fierce battle between opposing factions to establish the dominant narrative of the conflict, often using social networks and memes as a means of disseminating their viewpoints. Citizens are now aware that they are actively participating in this conflict, what some have called “the art of memetic war” (Yankovski; Scheirer; Weninger, 2021).

Thanks to platforms such as *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Reddit*, *Telegram*, and *TikTok*, Ukrainians are now able to share personal stories, videos, and photos. This allows for a more personal and honest view of the war and its consequences, free from government euphemisms and academic analyses (Ciuriak, 2022, p. 6). In one example, a young woman documented her experiences in a Chernihiv bunker during Russian bombardments on *TikTok*, and other citizens have similarly shared their stories as “citizen chroniclers” who understand the power of real-time reporting on social networks.

Returning to the results from the field study, many of the interviewees also expressed being very aware that the Russian government influences the opinion of Ukrainian citizens by spreading its political discourse through the media. There is also a clear awareness of the danger posed by Russian media when it comes to becoming informed about the latest news on the conflict (Martín-Ávila, 2018; Geissler *et al.*, 2022). This is the case of another woman from the *WLWA*, whose husband is now a prisoner of war of the Russian Federation, which creates a conflict within her family nucleus that is projected on her social networks.

“When I lived in Donetsk, under the so-called People’s Republic, I understood how the Russian media operated. For them, black is white and white is black. (...) We still have family members who watch Russian propaganda on social media and television, but we can’t persuade them it’s false. My mother-in-law still supports Russia, and this causes conflicts in the family.” (Member 1 of the *Warrior Liberation Women Association*, Kiev, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022).

Another interesting case being that of Major Alexis, a police officer and weapons instructor at the Kiev academy, whose ex-wife, with whom he shares a 17-year-old son, is on the Russian side, causing a serious family conflict.

“My first wife, with whom I previously lived in Donetsk, is now living in Russia with her new partner. She is active on social media and shares Russian propaganda, which has caused our 17-year-old son to stop following his mother on social media, and they no longer communicate with each other. The mother-son relationship has been broken.” (Major Alexis. Police Officer and National Guard. Kiev, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

As previously stated from the citizen’s perspective, Ukrainians are aware that the war is also being fought within the realm of information. From the military side, there is a special emphasis on the effects of misinformation and propaganda on the morale of the troops, and the interesting effects it has on the development of the war, so they carefully monitor their information channels.



Figure 3. Photo of a fighter from the Azovstal power plant in Mariupol. On the right, his appearance after his arrest and torture, by the Russian Federation. Shared on social media by a relative, member of the *WLWA* and participant in the focus group conducted in this research.

Some of the interviews with the women of the *WLWA* showed that for them the internet, and social networks were “forensic tools” intended to help them find relatives, friends, and acquaintances who were/are in a situation of imprisonment



“At my job, there is a conference once every two weeks to talk about the situation. My boss (economic police), who is in Kiev, gives me information that is more accurate than what is here (Chernivtsi).” (Vassily, 24 years old, Economic Police, Chernivtsi, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

“They are releasing the news that we are allowed to know. They are providing information in a softer way, so as not to destroy the spirit of the civilian population. For example, the death toll numbers published in the media are different from the numbers that I handle (...) Depending on the military rank, the access to information is different.” (Major Alexis. Police Officer and National Guard. Kiev, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

In general, based on the military and police sources consulted, there is some degree of distrust towards the accuracy of information treatment by the creators of content in new digital channels, which are not associated with rigorous and in-depth information processing.

“I prefer the media over social networks, as they conduct interviews and have access to the president and ministers, which is why I trust the official media.”

“Influencers have their own interests in presenting news, which is why I trust the official media more.” (Vassily, Economic Police, Chernivtsi, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

A notable aspect is that different regional affiliations regarding the conflict also shape media habits and practices within Ukraine. Similarly, as **Murrock et al.** (2018) pointed out, greater media literacy and the ability to detect fake news also depends on geographical belonging, as well as socio-economic and demographic groups, with younger populations and residents of Kiev, Chernivtsi, and Kharkiv being the least susceptible to this type of information.

“When the Ukrainian war began, there was a lot of misinformation from the Russian side. In this area (Chernivtsi), there is a lot of support for Russia, but the war is in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Mariupol. They create ‘official’ channels on *Telegram* that are actually false. Those channels were eliminated. They talked about how all of Ukraine will die... how a small enemy cannot defend itself against Russia... etc.”

“The Russian media is very deceitful.” (Vassily, Economic Police, Chernivtsi, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

On the other hand, the perception of disinformation as a negative element that plays an important role in the conflict, has led to the emergence of initiatives such as *StopFake*, a project from the *Media Reforms Center* NGO that has been operating since 2014, and was founded by communication professors and students. Initially, its objective was to dismantle Russian propaganda, and today it has grown into a program that is broadcasted on various TV and radio channels, with a strong following on social media. This concern has also been shared from the state level. The Ukrainian government has also developed various programs to increase media literacy and help its citizens discern propaganda or fake news. Numerous programs such as *Learn to Discern* have been implemented by the country’s authorities, sometimes in collaboration with international programs, to assist in the media literacy of the population.

On the Russian side, they continue to rely primarily on traditional media, such as *Russia Today* or *Channel 1*, and target independent media. Since the beginning of the conflict, there have been cases of censorship and the closure of media outlets that do not adopt the regime’s official line. Access to digital platforms such as *Twitter* or *Facebook/Meta* has also been restricted. Notably, local media outlets have been closed for fear of being accused of publishing “false” or unauthorized information and of facing heavy economic or prison sanctions. These include *Echo Moscow*, *MediaZona*, and *Novaya Gazeta* (**Corral-Hernández**, 2022). Meanwhile, on the Ukrainian side, there has been a significant use of social media, as previously mentioned. One of the most commonly-used tools in Ukraine to stay informed about the conflict is the messaging channel *Telegram*. Alerts are sent about Russian bombings and offensive strikes through both *Telegram* and *Viber*, or applications such as *Air Raid*.

“When the conflict started, all my friends had *Instagram* or *Telegram*, but when the war began, we used it to reach the young people who had no interest in it. To reach more people. For example, when the war started, the President and the Ministries wanted to unblock the Swift, and many people shared and distributed this important information for Ukraine. Many people and friends distribute information about Ukraine.” (Vassily, Economic Police, Chernivtsi, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

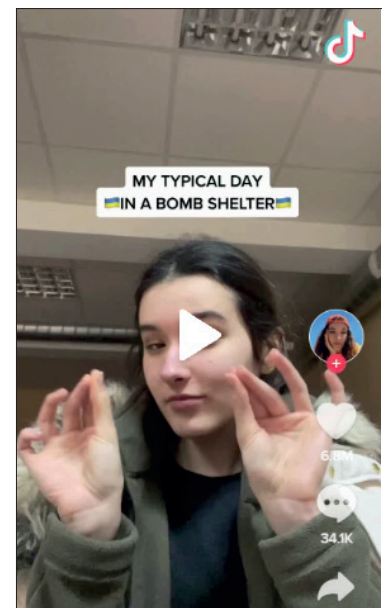


Figure 4. Ukrainian citizen @Valerishh showing her life in a bunker on *TikTok*

“The widespread use of social media is not shared in the same manner by the interviewed military personnel. The interviewees mostly agree in pointing out that regarding useful information related to the conflict, they preferred to trust the media directly linked to their chain of command”

At other times, the use of social media can cause problems for its users if the adversary is nearby, as they become tools for detection and denunciation.

“My husband took us from Mariupol to Melitupol. Two days after our arrival, Russia occupied the city. So even if I wanted to post something, it was difficult because the Russian army was monitoring social media, and they were also looking for us and my family.” (Member 6 of the *Warrior Liberation Women Association*, Kiev, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022).

The widespread use of social media is not shared in the same manner by the interviewed military personnel. The interviewees mostly agree in pointing out that regarding useful information related to the conflict, they preferred to trust the media directly linked to their chain of command.

“Unfortunately, I don’t trust television, social media, YouTube, or any channel. I mainly trust my colleagues who are on the second or first line of combat.” (Major Alexis, Police and National Guard, Kiev, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

However, evidence gathered from social media posts during the conflict suggests that frontline Ukrainian soldiers are utilizing these platforms for purposes beyond obtaining information related to the conflict. Instead, they are using them to document their daily lives in real-time or communicate with their families. A paradigmatic example of this is the late Alex Hook, a Ukrainian soldier who posted *TikTok* videos of himself dancing to assure his family that he was safe and well amidst the turmoil of war.

“At the beginning of the war, *TikTok* was used (...) to document the movement of Russian troops, but it was censored...”

“*Facebook* and *Instagram* are also used by frontline soldiers.”

“*Telegram* is the most important, both for Ukrainians and Russians.” (International press editor. Maidan Square, Kiev. October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022).

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the consumption of international media to obtain accurate and propaganda-free information about the conflict, which could be an effective alternative, also presented problems for those interviewed.

“As for Western media, we feel they are objective, but they do not have a deep understanding of the problem.”

“The so-called Donetsk Republic is not a separate ethnic group, quite the opposite. It is a complex territory where many different ethnicities and nationalities can live, which is different from what I have read (in international press).” (Member 3 of the *Warrior Liberation Women Association*).

There remains a certain level of distrust towards Western media, despite acknowledging their supposed objectivity. This may be driven by a fear of losing allied support in the war effort.

## 7. Conclusions

The study has shown that Ukrainian citizens use multiple channels to obtain information about the war. This use integrates a wide range and corpus of practices, ranging from maintaining habits of consumption of information produced by traditional media to follow major war-related news, social networks and instant messaging channels, used for both “micro” utilities (communication with family members, denouncing enemy actions, equipment needs or sharing of spaces to stay in), to documenting the everyday life of the war.

The responses from the interviewees, as well as the evidence found on social networks, show the widespread use of digital tools and social networks such as *TikTok* among military personnel. The objectives are similar to those of the civilians who document certain aspects of the war and reassure their families. Other networks such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* were also much used by soldiers on the front lines, while *Telegram* seemed to be the preferred network of both Russians and Ukrainians.

The data collected through observation of networks, as well as the data from the interviews conducted on the ground, showed that “the first global war in the era of social networks” has modified the method by which propaganda, inherent to wars, is created. This new framework, within the digital ecosystem, has made audiences ‘prosumers’ of propaganda. The Ukrainian people seem to be aware of the intentionality of many of the digital tactics undertaken by the enemy and their capacity for participation, although they have also discovered the usefulness of some social networks and instant messaging channels, some of which are not sufficiently efficient for obtaining practical information and staying in touch with their relatives on the front line. On the other hand, social networks and mobile phones have turned hundreds of citizens into “real-time chroniclers” of the war, who describe everyday situations and are aware of the amplified importance of their publications in the international context.

The general population has become aware of the potential of social networks to generate awareness among their less-mobilized fellow citizens. Some sources have pointed out that they actively participated by sharing important infor-



Figure 5. Ukrainian soldier Alex Hook's *TikTok* channel

mation for the country on their social networks or messaging channels, such as the unblocking of international payment and transaction system *Swift*, enacted by the Ukrainian government. Logistical constraints, such as subsequent internet shutdowns or fear of being detected by the adversary, have influenced media consumption and distribution habits.

Similarly, the conflict has attracted hundreds of content creators and influencers from around the world. This has contributed to making a certain spectacle of the conflict and a perception of lack of rigor that is associated with these digital channels by much of the public. Several responses given in the field research showed that these channels have not yet earned the trust of much of the Ukrainian population as primary sources of information about the war.

Some interviewees still give, despite their initial mistrust, greater credibility to traditional media due to various aspects, such as access to sources or economic and logistical capacity, as compared to streamers or content creators. Contrary to initial expectations, the consumption of international media was also problematic for interviewees who, even when granted a more objective approach to national media, argue against it in terms of their distance and little implementation on the ground, to provide rigorous and in-depth information about the war.

The responses of the interviewees demonstrate a clear identification of the propaganda related to the conflict, both from the Russian side and their own. In many cases, media consumption varied by geographic location, age, and affiliation, sometimes separating families based on whether their sympathies were pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian, which determined their media and propaganda consumption.

In the military sphere, some sources stated they only trusted members of their chain of command, who were much closer to the information events. Several sources also evidenced the clear attempts at disinformation by the Russian side through “official” *Telegram* channels that were quickly eliminated by the Ukrainian authorities. Another source of propaganda identified by the consulted individuals is the Russian-influenced *Orthodox Church* in Ukraine, especially targeting rural areas and older age groups of Ukrainians.

After studying and monitoring some specific trends that have accompanied the development of the war, it is observed that propaganda continues to have a crucial importance during armed conflicts, a perception not ignored by the involved citizens. However, some aspects derived from the digital environment, such as the increasingly prominent participation of audiences turned content creators, the diversification of informational offerings, or real-time transmission practices, have changed some of these propagandistic strategies. Today, the ease of dissemination of such propaganda has increased exponentially but also necessarily, considering aspects that involve the algorithm.

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