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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Ukraine conflict: the challenge of informational war

Georgiana Stănescu, University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract

The war in Ukraine has proved to be unlike any other armed conflict the world has seen before. In addition to the actual invasion and the bomb attacks, we have seen a real attack of false information, what we can call hybrid warfare. Like classic combat in theatres of operations, information warfare aims to destabilize society by bringing information with a strong emotional impact to the fore. And in the current media environment, social media has been the main vehicle for spreading false information, rumors, and deep fakes. This study analyses the main false information that has appeared in the public space about the war in Ukraine and how it has been taken up by media outlets.

Keywords: fake news, deep fake, media, communication, war, social media

Introduction

The explosion of disinformation (Lazer et al., 2018) has begun to lead to fears about the destabilization of democracy in any society. The first step toward this phenomenon was created with the Covid-19 pandemic. This led to true infodemics worldwide and thus a dangerous precedent was set that in the absence of concrete measures could lead in the future to a phenomenon with much more serious implications. Although the idea of spreading false information was not new, the scale of the trend in the context of global interest in Covid-19 had significant implications. This is why the European Union institutions, national governments, and other organizations with global implications have started to devise strategies and measures to combat this phenomenon. The outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, on the already tested ground, has created a veritable information war. We are witnessing a hybrid conflict in which battles are being fought with conventional weapons as well as media weapons. In the case of the conflict in Ukraine, the phenomenon has been amplified and a double motivation for the spread of false information has been created. On the one hand, there are those who have a direct interest in spreading this news, those involved in the war, and on the other hand, there are the intermediaries, those who can gain material income from distributing this type of information. A 2021 study by NewsGuard and Comscore shows the size of the profits made by spreading false information, demonstrating that online publications providing false information earn \$2.6 billion annually. Those who have a vested interest in the spread of untrue or partly true news are, in particular, those who want to gain an informational advantage in this war to destabilize society, disrupt it and impose a particular trend on public opinion.

In this context, the wave of information that has been spreading since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war has reached alarming proportions, as it has been propagated both online on social media and by some media outlets which, in their desire to provide information as quickly as possible, have not thoroughly checked the information that has appeared in social media. This article will present some of the blatant cases of false information appearing in European media outlets.

Fake news stories from the war in Ukraine

The Bucha massacre

One of the most telling cases of misinformation is that of Bucha, where Ukrainian authorities announced that they had found hundreds of civilian bodies in the streets. The information provided by Ukrainian officials went around the world, sparking a global outcry over the attitude of the Russian military. In response, the Moscow authorities officially denied any connection with the events in Bucha, and even tried to question the veracity of the images that appeared in the public space by propagating on social media short videos of questionable quality played in slow motion, giving the viewer the idea that the whole thing was just a show, well-directed, and the corpses were actually actors playing the role. To make this point, they showed images in which one of the corpses was allegedly moving, indicating that the illustration in Bucha was faked. In reality, all the events at Bucha turned out to be real, and the information could be proved by the original version of the film, as well as satellite images were taken two weeks before the Russian troops withdrew, which showed that the bodies were still on the streets.

The misinformation appeared mostly in Russian media, proving once again the information that "Russia has taken cyberwarfare to another level" (Khaldarova, 2016).

The "Kyiv Ghost" case

A few days after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military, the story of an extremely brave pilot who shot down 6 Russian planes in just one day appeared in the media. As soon as the news was made public, a user of the Tiktok network released images claiming to capture the "Kyiv Ghost", as the pilot was called by the media. Dozens of credible websites and media outlets, including in Romania, have featured those images in news bulletins or broadcasts, with the source given. But soon after, it turned out that the video was actually just part of a video game, with nothing to do with the Ukrainian pilot. It was all highlighted by NewsGuard. The video had nearly half a million views on Tiktok and reached 1.6 million views on Twitter. As Shoemaker (2017) pointed out, journalists nowadays no longer adhere strictly to news selection criteria, obviously in a rush to get the information out as quickly as possible and, by implication, for ratings or to attract views in the case of online publications. But respectable media outlets usually take care to correct any errors, as happened in Romania with a major news broadcaster. Therefore, in the current media environment, where anyone can create content, as in the case of the Tiktok user, the role of the trained journalist is extremely important (Molina et al, 2021).

Fake live streams

According to NewsGuard research, another way to attract views was fake live streams. For example, one Tiktok user attracted over 30 million users to his account by misleading viewers. Specifically, the user takes an old clip of a dramatic conflict or exercise, and changes the sound to make it seem as real as possible, adding sound as believable as possible. Unfortunately, in the early days of the war, many online publications took footage from these live feeds that looked extremely real. Dozens of such fake live streams appeared on social media, and the purpose was very clear, to attract money because the message of these clips was clearly donating to Ukraine, and those viewing the content were asking for details so they could transfer money mostly in cryptocurrencies. The purpose of these types of fakes is clearly material in order to obtain donations, through deception.

Deep fakes, the real information danger

A deep fake is a video content, made with the help of artificial intelligence by superimposing a fake image over a real one, giving the impression of the veracity of the video (Westerlund, 2019). Thus, in a deep fake, a person could be made to say anything, through technology, and the clip could be made in such a manner to appear 100% authentic. Having this possibility at hand, the originators of fake news also used it in the conflict in Ukraine. One of the most blatant is the deep fake in which President

Volodimir Zelenski appears and asks Ukrainian soldiers to surrender their weapons, mentioning that Ukraine is surrendering to Russia. The deep fake was quite well done, but on close inspection, one could see that the tone of the Ukrainian president's voice was much lower than usual, plus his head seemed to be oversized. The Ukrainian Centre for Strategic Communication announced that the Russian government might use such clips in the future to gain advantages on the battlefield and to demoralize Ukrainian soldiers. Although the video has had hundreds of thousands of views, journalists have only picked it up to present it as fake news.

Conclusions

In the current social environment, fake news is a real global danger, and the development of social media and the emergence of artificial technology is increasingly amplifying this phenomenon. The spread of fake news in the Ukrainian war proves once again the powerlessness of the authorities to combat this current. Even if there are people on social networks who check false information and remove counterfeit content, this usually happens after such news goes viral online. Even journalists have fallen for fake news these days, but in this context, the role of the journalist is becoming increasingly important. If journalists get it wrong there are levers to hold them accountable, and wrong information can be quickly corrected, but online, on social media, this is almost impossible to do in the context that behind many accounts there are actually trolls. At the same time, through this study, we also highlight the importance of the journalist in presenting false information when it is propagated on social media, as was the case in the Russian-Ukrainian war. International media institutions such as Euronews, BBC, CNN, or Romanian institutions have widely presented the fake news that appeared during the armed conflict in Ukraine, proving once again that the main function of the media is to inform, and the role of the journalist is also that of protector of democracy.

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